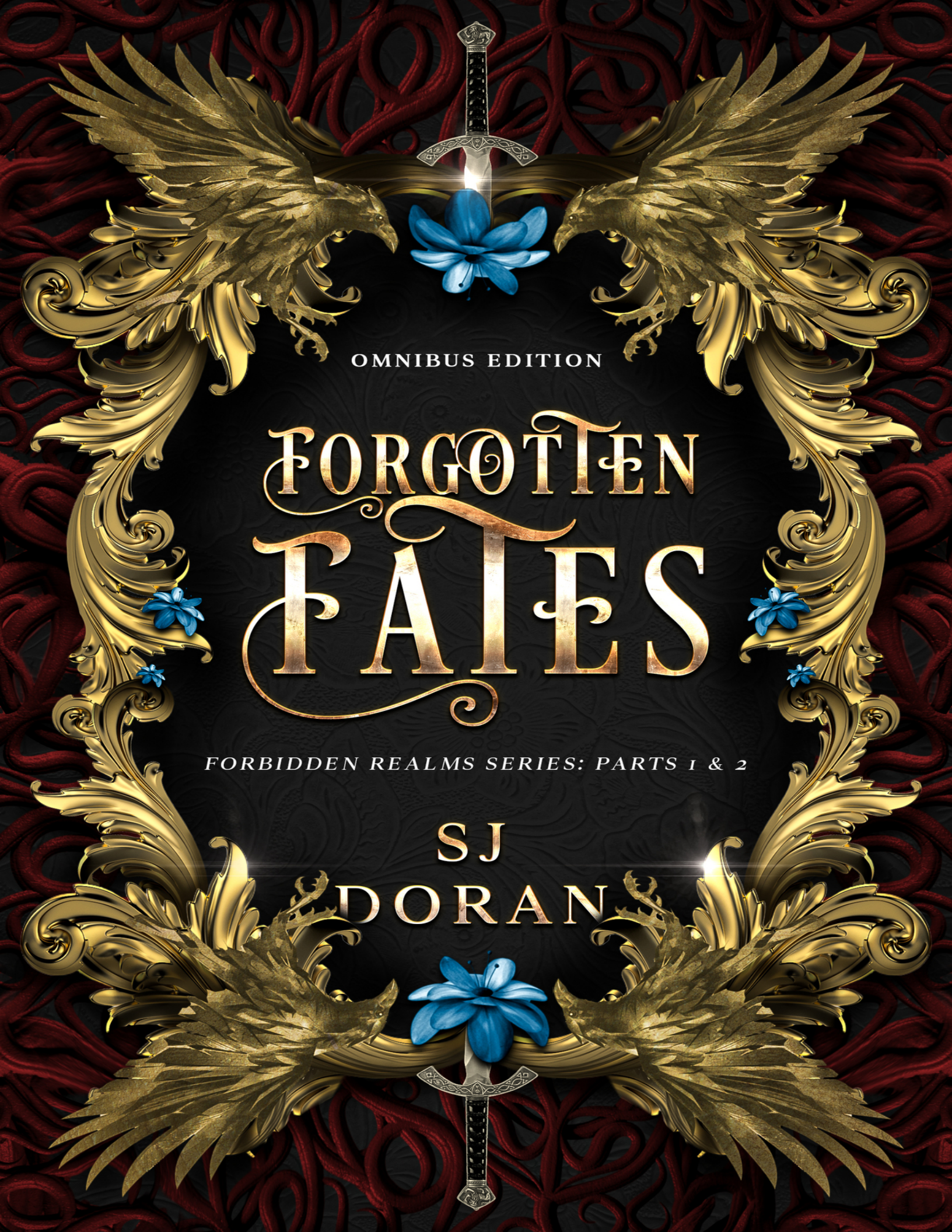
OMNIBUS EDITION
FORGOTTEN FATES
FORBIDDEN REALMS SERIES: PARTS 1 & 2
SJ DORAN

FORGOTTEN FATES

OMNIBUS EDITION

SJ DORAN

Forgotten Fates: part one of two

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Created with Vellum

*It's a monster, but it's *our* monster*
And this one's for all of you who love it as much as we do

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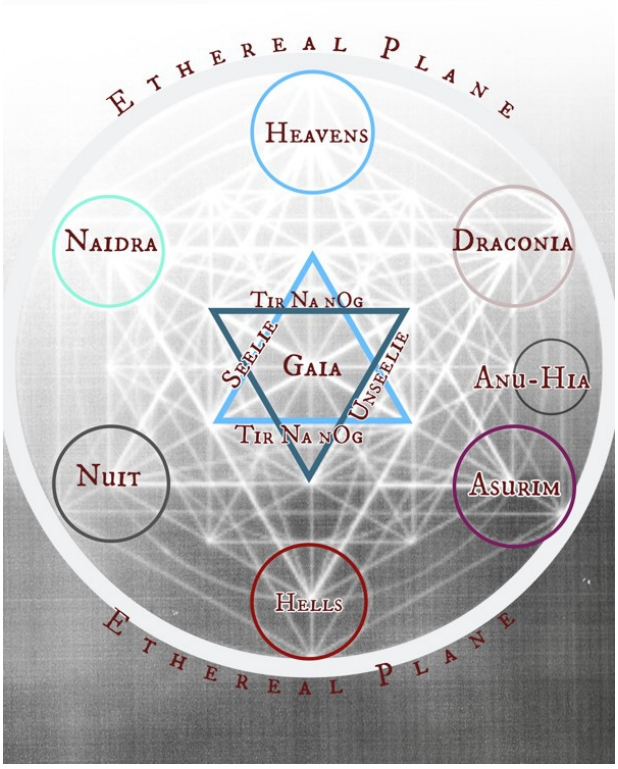

Gaia: The mortal realm

Do not be fooled by the seemingly powerless and short lived mortal race. Individually, human lives mean little to the immortals that dwell within the Realms, yet joined together they are the most powerful race in creation. Through their faith, fear and worship humans brought to life every deity and demon in existence.

Tír na nÓg: The Fae Realm

The lands of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter court are hidden away in a dimension within mortal realm, unseen by human eyes. As the original children of Gaia, the Fae believe themselves sole heir its power use powerful ley lines to drain the wild magic that runs through the lands, sharing only sparsely with the witches in their service.

Only with invitation can one find the Fae lands, and most

who enter, never return.

Asurim : The warlock Realm

Home to the Warlock and Gargoyle races. A world forged not by human imagination but by a source of black magic. With purple skies and an emerald colored moon, Asurim looks like a realm of dreams while filled with nightmares. The nine continents are overseen by the Dominae, selected by the ruling Sarratum to act as advisors and wardens of the realm.

The Hells: The Infernal Realm

The nine layers of Hell are home to the most depraved of souls found in creation. Rivers of burning sulfur and lands formed from decay, fire and ice are overseen by nine archdeacons, and all defer to the Nessus—the final layer where the heart of Hell is found, and where the throne of the Demon King stands.

The Heavens: The Celestial Realm

Seven tiers of Heaven serve the celestial purpose, preserving all which is virtuous and pure within the realms and providing a counterbalance to the corruption emitted by the Infernal Hells.

Draconia: The Shifter Realm

A land were the rivers run green and the mountains scrape red colored clouds. Most have only heard of Draconia in legends, home to the shifter races and ruled by the ruthless Dragon horde.

Nuit: The Realm of Perpetual Night

Unwilling to subject themselves to the rule of the Fae and surrender their right to hunt mortals for blood, Vampires sought refuge away from Gaia, finding their home within Nuit, a realm of eternal night.

Naidra: The Realm beyond the stars

this planet has served as home to travelers who cross the

galaxies. From the beautiful to the bizarre, all forms of life can be found within, and all are welcomed—for a price.

Ethereal planes: The Divine Realm

Gods and goddesses of every faith dwell within their own dimension, calling this Realm both their home and their prison.

To learn more about the history of each realm visit our website:*Forbidden Realms (SJDoranForbidden.Com)*

CONTENT WARNING

This story is intended for 18+ audience.

It contains heavy themes, graphic violence and descriptive s*x scenes
Our main characters were raised in the Hells, and have all the trauma and baggage one would expect because of that.

Please visit our website (sjdoranForbidden.com) for a comprehensive list of trigger warnings

PART I

By
SJ Doran
-a Forbidden Realms novel-

PROLOGUE

~One hundred twenty years ago, in the maze of the Malsheem, ninth layer of the Hells~

HEAVY IRON BOUND HER, THE REINFORCED CHAINS SIPHONING HER MAGIC while keeping her tethered to the wall, never to reach that open door. Trapped inside this cell for a time without end, while the denizens of the Hells entered her prison at their leisure.

Here she had experienced the levels of cruelty and sadism its infernal creatures were capable of, their wickedness without limit.

With a heavy grunt, she adjusted her position upon the filth-covered rocks; the effort causing the chains to rattle as she pulled her legs more firmly beneath her body.

The sharp pains had not yet eased; she couldn't reach to check her injuries, but knew by the sticky wetness against her thighs that she was bleeding still.

A tall form moved to stand at the doorway, blocking the glow of firelight coming from outside while casting shadows across the threshold. There, shrouded in darkness stood the form of a man. Not just a man, an infernal. *A demon.*

She had hoped for a short reprieve, time to heal. Such was the problem with hope, it left one weak when inevitable disappointment struck. She straightened her back best she could, set her shoulders, then finally lifted her head in clear defiance of her fate.

She parted her lips with a silent gasp when his dark gaze locked with hers, recognition causing her long dead heart to give a singular, painful squeeze inside her chest.

Cassius

The demon said nothing as he leaned further into the doorway, assessing her, his dark eyes cold and calculating.

No, not my Cassius. The sin-eater.

Her Cassius had died in this very cell three hundred years earlier, all that remained of him was this empty shell of his former self. The sin-eater. No soul, no memory.

No love...

“This is the warlock you spoke of, Azadiel? She looks too frail to be capable of wielding such great powers.”

He moved closer even as he dismissed her, giving her a clear view of him, each scrutinizing the other.

As expected from one carrying the title of Prince of Lust, heir to the throne of the nine hells, the sin-eater was everything exquisite, a midnight fantasy come to life. His form tall, muscular with strong shoulders framing a broad chest and lean waist. But that’s where the resemblance to *her* demon ended.

How she longed to feel the soft strands of his dark brown hair between her fingers. In a different life, she’d spend hours running her hands through streaks of copper and bronze that ran through its length.

Defying his father’s preference, Cassius had refused to sleek back his hair, knowing how much she loved its color. The demon who wore his face had it pulled back in a severe style, those rich colors muted, appearing nearly black, while adding a harsh angle to his beautiful features.

And his eyes, those were wrong too. Her Cassius had possessed eyes of molten gold and heated crimson shimmering in a pool of midnight black, like smoldering embers whose spark could ignite a devastating fire.

The eyes of the demon standing before her lacked that simmering glow, his gaze reminding her of unlit coal. Hard. Cold. Empty. Lacking the heat of that flame which had been extinguished three hundred years ago.

The longer she stared, the more she realized he in fact looked nothing like the demon princeling who had stolen her heart, her Cassius, with whom she had exchanged vows of love and devotion eternal.

No, the demon standing before her now was a mere copy of the man who had murdered her husband. The self-proclaimed god who had ripped out Cassius's soul, and her heart along with it.

Asmodeus. This demon looked like his father.

As an act of punishment for his revolt, Asmodeus had destroyed his own son, shredded his essence until nothing remained. From that empty shell, the demon god then molded himself the perfect heir. The sin-eater.

"Either way looks like we may have been too late, her body is broken and it appears her mind isn't too far behind. How long has she been down here?"

Despite the indifference in his tone, that alluring voice had remained the same, smokey and warm as if he were perpetually waking from a long nap.

Another sound filled the cell, raspy and breathless, and it took her a moment to recognize the echo of her own laughter.

"You're one to talk, broken prince. Between the two of us, I am left to wonder who is truly worse off... the prisoner, or the puppet."

Strong fingers wrapped around her throat without warning, cutting off her oxygen, squeezing until dots floated before her eyes.

"Insult me again at your own peril."

"Cassius, take your hands off her. And Amara, if you have any sense then you'll watch that blade you call a tongue."

The pressure around her neck eased, allowing her to take a deep, shaky breath as Azadiel stepped inside. The demon noble was sheathing a bloodied sword to his side, indicating she'd been about to receive more company inside her cell. Pain thrummed through her body at the thought, causing her to shift position again, securing her legs more firmly beneath her body.

When the sin-eater's fingers trailed from her throat to curl beneath her chin, she stilled. His grip not harsh as she had expected, but gentle instead.

"Your name is Amara?"

Had his voice trembled?

Then his thumb brushed along her bottom lip, the confusion she thought she'd seen within those dark eyes quickly replaced by ill-concealed disgust. According to her Cassius, his father's eyes were blue,

yet she'd only ever seen them flooded pitch black with rage. Like the sin-eater's.

"On Azadiel's advice, I've come to recruit you, Amara."

This was not her husband, not her demon. The sin-eater was nothing more than a duplicate of Asmodeus. She'd rather stay in her cell and hold strong to the small hope one of her visitors might accidentally kill her while having their 'fun'.

She would not be used by either of them.

Everything worthy within her had already been broken. The one being she'd loved above all else had been stolen. She had nothing left to offer.

"Uhm, thank you? But… no."

A jolt of trepidation shot down her spine as those sinful lips curled into a smile, one that oozed both arrogance and malice. His father's smile.

It mesmerized her long enough that she failed to notice the heat which rapidly spread through her chilled body as pleasure flooded her mind, leaving her defenseless as the sin-eater reached for her most private of memories.

His hand moved down his body, her eyes following intently as he wrapped it around himself giving a casual stroke. Up, then down. One large hand gripping strongly, the other tenderly cradling her jaw, thumb pressed on her bottom lip.

"Two fingers amata," his voice was warm and raspy with excitement, "just rub yourself, feel that moisture?"

His breath caught on a groan as she parted her thighs, separating her folds with two fingers, as he instructed. "Imagine it's my fingers. Gently now. Or my tongue."

Heat flooded her, threatening to steal her breath altogether. This time she'd burn with him. Melt for him. Her body was an inferno on the verge of combustion...

Cassius

She sighed longingly as her body and mind were flooded with lust.

"No."

Awareness surged, snapping her out of his enthrallment, nausea and rage building, shaking her to her core.

He'd grown powerful. Under his command, he could beguile her body, enthrall her senses, force her body into a state of arousal against her will.

Despite the nausea and anger, a wave of heat spread within her belly, shame filling her at the evidence of her arousal between her thighs.

“Release me this instant.”

Her words were a low hiss of warning, and had she possessed any power at all, she might’ve tried to kill him.

Despite the futility of the action, she struggled against the chains when the sin-eater moved to stand over her. Dread filled her at the sight of his arrogant smile, for it meant he was not yet finished with his torments.

No matter how she’d tried to hide it, those cold eyes of his soon discovered evidence of her arousal, and despite the rage, humiliation won out. Her stomach folded into itself, the taste of acrid bile rising up her throat.

“Stop, please…I’m going to be sick!”

He kept pushing. “Who’s a puppet now, Amara?”

That final bit of hope she’d been clinging to was shattered. Forcing her to accept the fact there truly was nothing left of her Cassius within him.

“I am…” she whispered softly, offering her surrender, the last spark of herself fading as she gave in to the pull of carnal lust.

Like Azadiel promised, the demon had indeed returned for her. Despite all, she’d held to the belief he would come save her. She’d been a fool.

He was here to finish what his father had started. The sin-eater had come to destroy her.

He was the only one who could.

“You have two choices, *Amara*. I can give you pleasure such as you have never known, or I can cause you agony such as you have never experienced. The choice is yours. Be my ally or become my enemy.”

1

THE SACK OF GHATA'N

~Present Day~

IT HAD TAKEN FIVE DAYS FOR HER UNDEAD ARMY TO WEAKEN THE GHATA'N defenses. Five excruciatingly long days of feeding her magic into the ravenous corpses who even now searched for entry into burning capital.

The templars had a legendary army, strong and skilled; the crafty bastards had secured their remaining forces within the walls of the holy city, guarding the temple in which she would find her salvation.

Amara was after nothing less than the Sword of Divine Justice. A legendary weapon rumored capable of destroying any being found guilty of great injustice, even if the transgressor was a god. If the rumors surrounding the sword were true, its cut could end a deity, and thus set her free from the curse placed upon her by a jilted Sumerian Death God.

She stood a good distance from the fortress, upon a plateau overlooking the chaos beneath, contemplating her next move. The harsh sun had baked the blood of her victims into the sandy dunes, staining the unbroken yellow with patches of rust.

Each served as a testament to those who'd fallen, marking where both her mercenaries and the Ghata'n soldiers had died. That was before her magick had forced their lifeless corpses to rise from their resting places and attack.

They had made a mistake by refusing the leniency she'd offered with her initial demands. Her plan had simply been to relieve them of the

Sword, and allow the citizens of Ghata'n to live out their insignificant lives in peace.

Unfortunately for all involved, the sanctimonious templars had rudely refused her terms, spewing nonsense about *never allowing their holy sword to fall into the hands of evil*. That was quite the assumption to make, for unlike true evil, she could be reasoned with. Sometimes.

Their refusal had come at a heavy price, for she was in desperate need of that sword and would stop at nothing to obtain it. Any moment now those protective walls would crumble, exposing the surviving citizens hiding behind its ancient stones to the ravenous corpses she'd unleashed.

Within the confinement of the capital a great fire raged, the green flames of Hexafire already having laid waste to most structures, leaving only the temple itself intact. The city was falling, but not rapidly enough. Aid would soon arrive.

With each passing moment her power weakened more, her control over the undead horde already waning. It was one thing to revive a dead body; raising an army of them whilst keeping the violent creatures under control was an entirely different matter. They were draining her.

Her gaze broke away from the distant battlefield for the first time since it had begun, her eyes dry and swollen, irritated from the sand and thick smoke billowing up from the burning capital of Ghata'n.

As soon as her mercenaries had begun their attack, the templars had summoned a barrier; white magick, pure and strong, strategically centered around the temple. These acclaimed warriors of virtue choosing the protection of the Sword over that of its civilians. It was an unforeseen hindrance, leaving her in need of securing a way inside the temple, while having no energy left to deal with the challenge.

Their magick was powerful enough to bar her entry, not even the unbiased dead would be capable of penetrating its defenses. The imprint was familiar to her — prayers from shrine maidens, their avowed purity offering a shield she could not breach. In order to weaken their power, its source would need corrupting, and there was only one being capable of accomplishing such a feat.

With a resigned sigh, Amara lowered herself to her knees upon the burning sand, her finger delving through the blood-stained grains, sketching out a meticulous circle, her memory guiding her as she recalled every symbol required to complete the summoning sigil.

With the last symbol etched, she freed her athame from her belt, then drew the sharpened tip of its obsidian blade across her palm. The growing sense of foreboding belied by her dispassionate gaze as she watched thick crimson drops well up from its cut.

With a soft sigh of defeat she fed her life's blood into the center of her six-foot circle, hoping the circumference was wide enough to offer comfortable passage.

Coming to terms with her decision she closed her tired eyes, gathered her fortitude, and spoke the summoning words. The offering of blood serving as key, unlocking the portal as she called for him.

Her voice was raspy, her throat dry, the words barely audible over the howling noise of the desert wind and the occasional screams which were carried upon it. Still, she knew he would hear her summons.

"Cassius, son of Asmodeus, sin-eater, Prince of Lust, King of the Nine Hells. Appear before me now. I summon you."

The words were spoken by rote, her compact with the demon spanned more than a century; the designation of 'King' being the only thing that had changed during that time.

They had bound themselves the day he released her from her prison cell, a promise to aid each other in attaining their thrones. Amara to regain the lost Crown of Asurim, to take her place as Priestess, only to end up as Queen to the warlock race when the true heir died — for Cassius it had been to dethrone his father and take his place as ruler of the Nine Hells.

They both now wore those crowns, Amara for more than a century, Cassius for a handful of years. Their agreement was met, yet their binding still stood, and she never dared to question why. Avoiding him entirely was the safer option. This would be the first she acknowledged their bond in the five years since Cass had taken his father's place.

Distance had been safer, because seeing him hurt. Even after all this time she had troubles keeping the demon firmly shut away in her memories.

Not him. Her Cassius was dead.

The demon who wore his face was a soulless imitation, mocking her. A final insult dealt by her jailer, the previous King of the Hells, Asmodeus.

A snarled growl greeted her as soon as she finished speaking the words, her eyes traveling up towards the impressive male now occupying her circle. Six and a half feet of artistically sculpted masculinity. His near

black hair messed from what she suspected had been frantically grasping female hands, his lips still kiss swollen.

"A heads up would've been nice." His voice settled over her like dark silk, everything about the demon seductive. "Before summoning me across realms."

It's not him, he's not my Cassius…

Over a century had passed since the sin-eater had released her from her cell, since they had bound themselves to each other as allies, and each time she was confronted with him, that initial sting, that sense of loss gripped her.

The raw intensity never failed to undermine her efforts in moving on with her life, to bury her heart alongside the memories of her demon. So, she had kept her distance, only seeing the sin-eater when they had joined forces in battle.

Eyes dark as coal bored into hers as he wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, his tongue sliding across his lower lip, lingering over a remaining taste. Judging by his half-dressed state he had been in the middle of something. Someone, more accurately.

With a dismissive shrug she swiped her hand through the sand, breaking the summoning circle which bound him in place, giving him permission to enter this realm.

"No time for forewarning demon. I hope you didn't spoil your appetite."

She kept her eyes on his, pointedly ignoring his hands as they fixed his jeans closed.

He stared at her for a moment, his familiar dark gaze expressionless before it moved towards the burning city in the distance, taking in the smoke and fire filling the air, the screams of the dying and the moans of the undead who feasted upon them deafening, even at this distance.

A low whistle passed between his pursed lips. "It's no wonder you look like shit priestess. How many zombies are you feeding down there?"

"They are *not* zombies."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Really? Then what are they?"

He was baiting her, and she knew it. Her gift of necromancy had always been a topic of controversy between them during battle. Yet no matter how distasteful he found her powers to be, even the demon couldn't deny their usefulness.

“They are what remains of the army I paid off to invade the city.”

He fixed her with a poignant stare, then turned his eyes down toward the fortress, just in time to see the horde of undead breach the southern wall. Consumed by their hunger, her creatures had begun to trample over each other, the pile of bodies building until the horde successfully scaled the height of the wall.

The screams of innocent civilians carried upon the breeze, their pitches varying from panicked to sheer terror. With the undead roaming the city’s grounds, Ghata'n had finally fallen.

“Okay fine, so they're zombies. About eight hundred of them.”

She gave a slow shake of her head, trying to keep control while the creatures went into a feeding frenzy. “Give or take a few lost in that pile up.”

“Mara.” His dark eyes pinned her. “That’s madness. Not even you can sustain that many for any real amount of time.”

Power flared around her, the air crackling with malice.

“You think *now* is the time to be questioning the limits of my power, sin-eater?”

His eyes flashed, the cold black voids lighting up as he latched onto her sin. *What was that saying about pride?* His lips turned up into a sardonic smirk as he slowly looked her up and down.

Shit. Exhaustion had run her temper too close to the surface. Giving insult hadn’t been her intention, especially when she was in need of his favor. And admitting defeat was not her strong suit.

Instead of attacking, he extended his hand to her, his eyes grown hooded.

“I’m not foolish enough to make an enemy of you Amara.”

She quickly tamped down the tingles rushing through her at the way he purred her name.

He helped her off the ground, stepping out of the circle as she snatched her hand back, the fleeting contact between them as intimate as a caress, and it scorched her.

“Don’t, Cassius… this does not make us friends.”

A pang of something akin to sorrow shot through her chest. His name on her tongue...

Dawning comprehension washed over his expression as he studied her face. He stood next to her, close enough the heat of his body sunk into her

bones. The scent of him evoked memories that were already too close to the surface. She shook her head, trying to dislodge them. Her barriers were clearly spent.

“Is this because of your curse? Finally going to tell me what it entails?” Cass asked.

She looked up at him, his attention focused on the scene below them in the distance. A lock of ebony hair had fallen between his brows, and her fingers itched to brush it away from his face, craving the once familiar feel of his soft hair between her fingers. Instead, she balled up her hands, steadying herself with the bite of her small, claw-like nails digging into her palms.

Summoning the sin-eater should’ve been no more than a useful tool at her disposal, a way to get into the temple. Instead, she was barely in control of her emotions.

Foolish, Mara.

Her unease was affecting her strained power, further agitating the undead in the distance, who grew even more frantic and violent in their attacks.

“Not an open topic of conversation, got it.” With a sardonic arch of his brow, his gaze shifted back to the melee.

He sighed deeply, muttering under his breath, “fucking hells.”

Turning back, he was the cold, stoic newly appointed King of the Hells once more, though his gleaming eyes shone with knowledge. Of her?

“You’re right, Priestess, we’re not friends, in fact I couldn't care less if you live or die. Now tell me why you interrupted my dinner with your summons.”

The edge of her irritation dulled, her attention turning back towards the burning city in the distance, and the slaughter taking place within its breached walls. The memories of her Cassius safely tucked back into the recesses of her mind.

“Do you see that temple in the center of the city? Not only does it safeguard the remaining Ghata’n army, it also houses the legendary Sword of Divine Justice, the Shamshir-e Zomorrodnegār.”

“The Sword of Divine Justice.” Cassius's expression changed from bored to positively gleeful. “Do you believe the legend holds true?”

Despite her exhaustion, she felt a matching smile tug against her dry and torn lips. At times, his enthusiasm reminded her of that of a child.

“The Sword of Justice, able to slay even immortals, and dare say, gods, if they are on the wrong side of truth. I’d say there is only one way for us to find out for sure.”

“Then how may I be of service to you, High Priestess?”

She pointed towards the temple once more, her finger tracing the outline of the radiant shield which enveloped the imposing structure.

“My magic can't penetrate the barrier which surrounds the temple, its magic is sustained by prayers from the vexingly virginal and immaculate shrine maidens.”

His grin widened even as hers fell.

“Their power is too pure and uncorrupted for me to breach, I need them to become tainted with sin. Once corrupted, I can easily tear down those barriers.” Her stomach rioted with nerves at the admittance of needing his help.

Cassius's black eyes glowed as a slow smile spread over his mouth, his tongue trailing along his sensual lips. “I could eat.”

2

ENTER THE DEMON

HE TOOK IN THE SCENE OF CARNAGE SURROUNDING THEM, BREATHING deeply the remnants of wrath, the heavy lingering pride that was swiftly diminishing, and scented the innocence on the air.

His mouth watered.

All that lay between them and the Sword of Divine Justice, the legendary bringer of death—even to the most powerful magical beings—was Amara's army of undead and a temple of avowed priestesses, likely with a small contingent guarding them.

He was still working around his shock at her discovery, he'd long thought the Ghata'n extinct. They had survived, were strong here, and it appeared as though their civilization centered around that sword.

He yearned to feel it in his palm. The Sword of Justice, in the hands of a demon. The irony alone made this worth it.

All that remained of the soldiers who once secured the stronghold was an army of the undead, cannibalising and mangling corpses, shreds of their former colors hanging off their chests. Death. Glorious, double-crossed death had occurred here.

From the path of destruction, the body parts that lay strewn across the bloodied field, combined with the concentration of blood patterns upon the sandy dunes he was able to deduce the warlock priestess had killed the army she'd allied with herself, before setting their ravenous corpses loose upon the capital. Fascinating.

He looked down at her, reassuring himself that she had a grip on the power she was expending. This was the first he'd seen her since they'd usurped his father's crown. He'd set Basileus up as regent and lost himself in the mortal realm, occupying himself with avoiding his rule, while she'd been absorbed in hers.

She didn't seem overjoyed to be seeing him again, and one certainty he could bank on, she wouldn't have summoned him if she'd had any other choice.

She'd always been cold with him, keeping their relationship all business, while he'd always been amused by her. She'd been no more than a bedraggled prisoner in his father's fortress when they'd first met, with him in desperate need of an ally — her power had shone like a beacon of hope.

"How much longer can you hold them?" He studied her as she studied the scene before them, her strain evident. The makeup from her heavily lined eyes smudged down her cheeks, her full lips — yes, he'd noticed — were chapped and bleeding, the bones of her face stark. She looked half-starved and so exhausted she might be mistaken for one of her risen.

Her hair was silver today, he'd seen it nearly every shade in the spectrum, he liked this look. It made her porcelain skin shine like a pearl. She was taller than the average female, poised with regal bearing, but tired as she was and stripped of her defensive ceremonial robes, she had an air of fragility about her, casting her in a light he'd never before seen. Vulnerable.

He'd always thought her beautiful, but he'd firmly placed her in the 'unapproachable' category. Cold, standoffish... seeing her like this brought forth a surge of some foreign protective instinct. He was no knight to rescue damsels in distress, always been more likely to take advantage of their situation and seduce them with bargains.

"As long as you need, sin-eater." Her body trembled, but still held strong.

The undead were losing interest in their feasting on the remaining survivors, with nothing left to distract them, their attention would turn this way. Amara couldn't keep hold on them forever, and *damn it all,* he hated zombies. He turned his attention to the temple.

Purity could be corrupted. Best way to incite corruption? Fuel it from within. Set them against each other. Find their weakness and exploit it.

He held his hand up to Amara’s back, setting their pace as they moved in for the stronghold. His thumb brushed across the small of her back as he led her safely into the burning wreckage of the city. The touch was meant to reassure, nothing more, his hand rough against the fine silk of her robes. Her focus never wavered, though he felt her tense up then sway slightly into his touch.

He never forgot those rare moments when she yielded to him during their many battles, relying on him whenever her strength had been waning. Did she even realize?

They made their way down the sandy slope, with every step they took, he could feel himself grow stronger. Lust was his preferred method of feeding, but he could take sustenance from any form of sin. The devastation which had occurred here so recently was feeding him to the point of being gorged. And still his power swirled around him, seeking more.

There were times when he feared what would become of him if he completely gave in to his hunger, that unrelenting need to feed. The intensity of his appetite scared even him, and no matter what depravities he surrendered to, nothing satisfied the yearning for long. Perhaps that is why he found her creatures so upsetting, he recognized the similarities. Maybe someday he would succumb to it and lay waste to everything around him, just to experience the satisfaction of fulfillment, but today was not that day.

A soft hiss escaped the priestess, and she pulled back. Small billows of smoke rose up from where her exposed skin had brushed against the barrier.

“I can go no further. The purity of their magic burns away the darkness feeding my own, and I’m too depleted to effectively ward against it.” She turned back, patting his chest as she stepped around him. “You’re on your own from here sin-eater, until you’ve started your dinner.”

Two armed warriors stood at the large metal doors, guarding the entrance to the temple, bathed in the stench of urine. They had stood their ground, watching an army of undead cut a swathe through their people. Pissed their own pants, but they’ stayed. He sought out their sins, and was hit with an abundance of pride tinged with avarice. He devoured it, opening them to a full intrusion. Once he had a foothold in their minds, his power seeped in, deconstructing their very selves.

He plucked their swords from their hands as they fell to their knees, whimpering. He gave them a swift death, taking their heads so he could move on. The spell didn't block his passage, but he felt it pulsing through him. The goodliness of it.

His power faltered, drawing back in, but it didn't dull the essence of who he was. He was the only son of the King of Sin. He was corruption. Lust oozed from every pore in his body.

A cluster of armed soldiers rushed the door the moment he breached the threshold. He was unarmed, wearing nothing but a half-buttoned shirt and well-worn jeans. Couldn't let them get close enough to swing.

Gilded marble columns were evenly dispersed along the length of the cavernous room, low chairs and sofas surrounded a fountain in the center, the only door out was opposite the one he came in, the two guards blocking that door not leaving their post.

Innocence was pervasive in this temple, the prospect of all that corruption had his power flaring. He was ravenous for it.

The ladies scattered in the background, his cursory glance noted half dozen females, draped in sheer fabric that covered the bare minimum. The guards closed in, his power seeped out. He was now armed, but without armor, one demon against a handful of trained soldiers.

He had no issues utilizing the tools made available to him. He let more of his essence free, all of the females now drawing in closer. He was the Prince of Lust, a sin-eater, he thrived off what would be their downfall.

They crowded the armed guards, who held their weapons high, but had no chance of using them without harming the maidens.

In the guards' confusion, Cassius's power latched on to the overriding lust. Avarice. They wanted these women, gods knew how long they had been tormented with that longing.

Well, gods—and Cass.

Slipping into their minds was like slicing butter with a hot blade. Their lust was potent, filling all his senses, nearly bringing him to his knees with his own craving. He took it all, glutted on their envy and devoured their pride, leaving them quivering heaps on the ground.

He picked up a sword and swung it through the air with a wicked slice, taking one head after another, blood spraying up across his chest and face.

Warm hands spread over his chest, then at his back, then curling around his legs. At some point they had all shed the minimal robes they

were wearing, and they all stood proud, unashamed of their nudity.

“Let us clean you.” One woman stood in front of him, her voice breathless.

The innocence radiating off them was a magnetic compulsion, the lust throbbing through him increasing until he was near mindless. He tried pulling his power back, but he had fed so much, the excess merely surrounded him, too much to absorb.

One female was wiping him down with a hot cloth, saturated with clean smelling herbs. And there went his pants. Another circled her hand around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. He deepened it, starving for it.

He would show them no mercy.

His hands found a naked breast as a hot mouth wrapped around the head of his cock. His hips jutted, pushing deeper, seeking more. He felt bare breasts against his back, hands circling to the front of him, running down the ridges of muscles, down to cup his sac.

With a rough groan, he gave in, burying himself deep in the throat of a faceless temple maiden. His hunger increasing, his body reduced to primal need.

He felt the spell weakening its hold on the temple, his corruption spreading, eating up the purity that served as such a powerful protection it had stopped even Amara in her tracks.

He gave a self-satisfied grin. Innocence never could withstand his… charms.

Not caring which he took, he grabbed the closest female and lay her on the ground, turning to the one beside her.

“Kiss her mouth.” He turned to another. “You. Kiss her, between her thighs. Tell me how she tastes.”

His tongue sought the folds of the one spread in front of him. Another knelt at his side, hand wrapped around his cock, tentative at first, though not lacking enthusiasm.

One woman was between the legs of another, panting with little mewling noises, her shiny pink tongue lapping at the folds of the one kissing the one he was feasting on. Even to a demon as jaded as he, the sight was decadent. They were insatiable. But then, so was he.

“Who wants to be fucked first?” He sat up on his knees, swiping his arm across his face, licking the taste of her orgasm off his lips.

There was a chorus of “me’s” and pleading, one of them having the foresight to get on her hands and knees in front of him, her body facing away, her glittering eyes watching him over her shoulder.

His fingers sought out her flesh, gently spreading moisture, delving inside briefly, to ensure she was ready. He put in another finger, spreading them slowly, opening her. When she started rocking back to his hand, he removed his fingers and fisted his cock, rubbing it over her entrance.

He plunged in slow until he was fully sheathed, her throaty moan urging him on. He pulled back and thrust harder, deeper, then turned to meet the lips of another woman who knelt at his side.

“Too much,” the woman he was buried in squeaked, “too big.”

Shaking, he managed to pull back and slow down. Right. Virgins.

“Well Demon, I can see you’re going to be a while.” Amara’s voice echoed above the moans and cries in the chamber.

The corruption had clearly done its work, allowing her to tear down the protective barriers of the temple, he would’ve rather enjoyed seeing her do it.

“So, don’t mind me, I’ll just tiptoe around this mess and collect my sword.”

He broke off the kiss with a snarl.

“Our sword, priestess.” One of the ladies cupped his balls, and he nearly shot off. He groaned low.

“Wait for me, there’s still...” he grunted, his words ate up by the greedy mouth of a needy female. *Still guards*.

He felt Mara’s hand in his hair, distinctive from all the other touches because of the peace it brought.

“No can do, Demon. My time is precious, and the show’s a repeat.” Her voice was cold, her tone inattentive.

She was going into the inner sanctum alone and he was entangled in female lusts, in thrall to his own power. He wasn’t going to be of any use.

“He likes the hot wax,” Amara whispered and Cass nearly laughed.

Before the thought of it had him coming hard. His mind blanked, his Priestess forgotten.

3

THE SWORD OF JUSTICE

THE SIN-EATER'S HEAD WAS BENT BACK, DARK EYES HOODED, AND SINFUL lips parted as he succumbed to release. His power expanded around him like a vortex as he fed those greedy, virginal mouths. Their downfall was his victory.

As they had battled to reclaim the realm of Asurim, Amara had witnessed many different versions of the same scenario. Each time it had struck her how enthralling the act of corruption could be, how enticing, and how devastating it felt.

"*Our sword?*" Letting out a decidedly un-ladylike snort, she turned her back on the debauchery in the main room, leaving the sin-eater to his meal.

"Silly demon, I'm far too greedy to share what's mine."

He'd stopped being hers centuries ago, and as such had rights to nothing.

She had placed everything on the line in her effort to retrieve this sword, something her warlock council, her Dominae, would surely berate her for. This was partially the reason why she had opted to contract a mercenary army rather than involve her own battalions. Breaking the curse placed on her head by her mother's greed was a personal matter, not business of the Asurian realm.

Every muscle screamed in protest as she hurried along unfamiliar corridors, ignoring the spasms that pulled at her calves and the stitches at her side. Running had never been her strong suit, having frozen into

immortality while locked in a cell hadn't done her any favors in that regard. By her own determination, it had left her rather scrawny of form and weak of body.

But what she lacked in physical strength she more than made up for with her magicks and wit. She could hold her own against man, immortal, and even the gods.

Despite the massive size of the temple, its layout was a rather simple one. Excellent. The sooner she had the sword in hand, the sooner she could leave this dismal place and return to Asurim. A warm bath, rich food, a soft bed, those thoughts spurred her on, kept her feet moving.

Once back within her realm she could recharge her magick within the temples before returning to the Inner Sanctum and see to her duties. As her Dominae never tired of reminding her, magick ought to be treated with respect, and Amara had abused hers over the last five days, nearly depleting it fully.

The old stone corridors circled, and despite exhaustion and urgency she almost wished she had more time to take in the intricate mosaic designs decorating the walls. The stories they depicted made ancient temple come to life around her in vivid accents of blues, greens and yellow set against white stone. Even as a child, she adored rich colors.

The next few corridors led into a circular hall, the room of worship. Stepping inside, she discovered an altar cluttered with gilded statues depicting various gods and goddesses, their hands opened in gesture of benevolence. Behind it, secreted away behind yards of draped fabric lay an alcove. Excitement took hold.

Her lips curled up in a sneer as she passed by the altar. Benevolence. *Such a foolish notion*. She'd served the gods for nearly a century, long enough to realize none of them were capable of such magnanimity. The gods were neither merciful nor kind.

They were greedy, fickle and most importantly, they were fading. With their once limitless powers waning, they did not offer their blessings freely, nor would they spare any to worshippers who subjected themselves to their will. The only way to obtain favor from the gods was to barter with them, and only by obtaining a vow was it guaranteed they would hold true to their promise.

Her mother had known this well, and as a result Amara now had a Sumerian death god trying to collect on an old debt. In her greed for a

crown and sole rule of Asurim, she'd bartered Amara's soul away at birth.

It had been her sixth birthday when Namtar had first tried to collect. She'd ended up in Hell instead.

"Need that blasted sword."

Pushing aside sheer fabric layers of citrine and topaz blue, she entered the alcove. The scent of burning sage permeated the air, blocking out the scent of ash and smoke which hung heavy in the temple from the burning capital of Ghata'n.

Divine energy brushed her along senses as soon as she stepped forward. *Finally.* A relieved sigh passed through sunburned lips as she was greeted by a welcoming sight.

Offerings of colorful flowers and richly scented incense surrounded the pedestal upon which the mythical Sword of Divine Justice stood. Even without holding the sword, she knew the legends regarding its powers held true, the air in the alcove vibrated with the energy contained within the shining metal.

A weapon capable of *slaying a god*.

"Step no further vile woman, your presence here taints this holy place."

Turning in place she discovered nine temple guards approach, drawing their curved scimitars, aiming for her.

"Oh, if you think my actions here are vile, you boys really ought to take a peek at the show in progress upon the nave floors. I bet if you ask nicely, the demon wouldn't mind showing you a few tricks to please the ladies..."

She thought to stall them as she reached for that dwindling spark of magic within. Unfortunately, none of them seemed particularly inclined to indulge in curiosity, all of them lunged for her.

"Shit!"

Rather than the green flames of Hexafire fire she tried to summon, tendrils of black rose up from her palms and a circle of golden light began to form at her feet, an instinctual fight or flight response.

This was good and bad— the good being that her circle would surely protect her against their attack, the bad being that it also effectively trapped her in place. All she had left was the little bit of infernal energy stored within, only a small spark of magic remained at her disposal, and that she couldn't waste, it was that thread of magic that was kept the

undead under her control. Once severed, they would no longer know a master, which meant she and the sin-eater would become included in their dinner options.

Her expression remained dispassionate as the curved blades of their single-edged swords struck the barrier of her circle, the Ghata'n weapons notorious for their ability to cleave through bone, but otherwise quite useless against magick.

Dispassion turned to shock as her barrier gave a loud crack with the impact, its protection faltering.

Blessed! How many times did she have to remind herself to watch her damned pride?

The Templars actually possessed the foresight to have their weapons infused with divine energy. Unfortunately, this realization struck at the same time as the blade. She felt its sharp steel slide through the leathers of her breastplate before plunging deep into her stomach.

Liquid fire burned through her abdomen, white magick, pure and powerful corroding the infernal energy from which she drew her power. The rough yank of the blade pulling free knocked her off balance, her feet slipping on the blood that was spreading across the limestone.

The Sword

Even as she stumbled back she reached out for it, yet her momentum caused her to crash into the pedestal upon which the Sword rested, sending it toppling. Her fingers ghosting along its golden hilt, her reach falling short when a meaty fist grabbed hold of her hair.

Lighting flashed before her eyes as she was hauled up into the air, the laceration in her stomach tearing wide as her feet dangled above the floor. With no magic to fall back on, she would need to defend herself through physical combat, which honestly didn't much improve her chances of survival.

Pain jolted through her with each movement, still she kicked out with all the strength she could muster. Kick, pull back, kick again, not stopping, even when a blade was pressed against the curve of her neck.

"The Holy Sword will never fall into the hands of evil."

His words oozed righteous indignation, her struggles causing the blade to cut into her flesh. He wanted her head. He could damned well join the waiting list.

“Is that all the small talk you Ghata’n are capable of? No wonder this place is brimming with virgins.”

Again, she kicked out when his hold on the blade tightened, its cut pressing deeper.

“Today you die, warlock whore!”

Desperate times called for desperate measures. The sin-eater was strong and had just fed, surely he could dodge a few ravenous corpses. *Or a few hundred of them.*

She reached for that final thread of energy and pulled its power into herself, converting it to black magick as she summoned forth the darkness to come to her aid. And it obeyed, just not in the manner she had hoped it would. There was no Hexafire to burn her enemies, no hell-beasts to slay her foes.

Instead, darkness fused with her, calling to her exhausted magic as it searched for power to latch onto. The energy she used up had been connected to her gift of Necromancy, and it was that power which answered its call.

“Oh, double shit…”

That wouldn’t help, already the city was overrun with the undead.

A powerful burst of magic ignited within her core before sinking into the ground beneath the Templars feet. And through the malice she sensed within the darkness she summoned, she knew it wouldn’t be mere ‘zombies’ to answer its summons this time. And she couldn’t stop it.

Two templars were holding her, one by her hair, the other grabbing her kicking legs, while a third pulled back his sword to take aim. One forceful blow was all it would take to sever head from shoulders. The blade swung down, and chaos erupted.

4

SUMMONED WHAT?

THE BLOW INTENDED FOR HER NECK STRUCK THE AIR AS THE GROUND trembled, its loud rumble dampening the sound of screams as deep fissures tore apart the limestone covered ground. White marble columns collapsed as tremors turned solid ground into roiling waves, successfully knocking her captors to the ground, herself right along with them.

Struggling to find purchase upon unsteady ground, she rose, letting out a hiss at the templar who'd been holding her up by her hair. She ought to be fleeing, yet instead she lunged for him, anger giving her enough strength to pry the blade free from his loosened grip, turning it to thrust its curved steel into his chest.

"You NEVER fuck with a girl's hair."

His gurgling breaths confirmed she'd perforated a lung. Disappointing. She'd been aiming for his heart.

No time for a second try however, she needed to find the sin-eater and get them out of the city, and the hell away from this realm, for with that final bit of magick she had just doomed the entirety of Ghata'n.

Heavy chunks of marble were raining down from the ceiling, those beautiful mosaic walls crumbling with each violent quake. The temple was collapsing around her.

Already, the remaining templars had scrambled onto their feet.

"She's causing this. Kill her — save the temple, protect the sword."

Again, quite the assumption to make on their part.

"Do I look as if I'm in control? There's no stopping this."

As if to mock her, the violent trembling eased as soon as the words had been spoken, resulting in eight templars looking down at her in triumph.

Idiots

When their scimitars raised again, she knew she'd blown her chance at escape. Fearing what was coming, she hurriedly climbed onto the overturned altar, watching the ignorant templars approach.

Stone rumbled and groaned once more, but no tremors followed this time. Instead dark fumes began to slowly rise up from beneath overturned ground, its pungent smell reeking of decay, confirming her suspicion. The Draugr were coming.

From beneath the sandy loam, rotted remains sprang up like twisted roots. Arms and legs struggled to breach the surface, blindly grabbing hold of anything and anyone within their reach. Their swift arrival not surprising, for the Ghata'n were known to build their sacred temples atop the burial sites of ancestors. A tradition they would all soon regret.

A glint of gold caught her eye and she cast a longing glance at the Sword of Justice, laying no more than five feet away, crossing that small distance impossible as the Draugr rose from their graves. More important she lives…

Perched atop the altar, she observed with gruesome fascination as the Draugr rose from ancestral graves. Sunken, milky eyes glowed inside their skulls, their forms gaunt and decayed. What remained of muscle and flesh upon their frames was necrotic and tinted a bluish black of color. And even she was forced to admit the sight of the Draugr to be the fuel of nightmares.

Though technically undead, and fond of eating their victims, they were nothing like her 'zombies'. Her creatures lacked conscience, were devoid of agenda, they possessed no soul. Take out their teeth and they were quite harmless, really. The Draugr were not.

These were vengeful spirits steered not by hunger, but by jealousy of the living. They were intelligent, could strategize. Destroying their corporeal form would simply return them to their natural state, that of a disease spreading fog. Which meant… they couldn't be destroyed.

The Draugr, once unleashed would possess a corpse and use it to hunt down every living creature they came upon, dragging them down into the earth before feasting on their flesh and bone. These malicious spirits

would not stop until there was no more life left for them to claim upon the surface.

A laugh bubbled from her lips, its tone lost somewhere between amusement and hysteria at the sight of the terrified expressions of the Ghata'n warriors.

"You really should've handed over the sword when I asked nicely."

They slashed and hacked with their bone severing swords, but it wouldn't save them. One by one, the draugr would take them, and they knew it.

Her laughter died with the taste of copper upon her tongue, a gush of fresh blood filling her mouth. *Triple shit*. She'd thought the cut to have done minor damage, now she suspected she'd been slowly hemorrhaging into her belly. The tight bindings of her leather breastplate applying enough pressure to the wound for it to go unnoticed until now. She needed to get out of here.

It wouldn't be long before her own creatures were drawn to the screams which echoed through the crumbling temple, compounding to the shit heap she currently found herself in. Somehow, she and the sin-eater would need to make it out of Ghata'n, alive preferably, and with the sword in their possession if at all possible.

When the last of the guards was being dragged towards his grave, she knew the time for inaction had come to an end, else she'd be next.

Not allowing herself to dwell on what would happen to her should they grab hold, she lunged off the altar to land beside the toppled pedestal. Pain exploded through her abdomen upon impact, nausea rocking her.

Blowing out a slow breath she extended her arm, and finally greedy fingers closed around the hilt of the legendary Sword of Justice.

"Help… me…"

She turned to see the templar who'd aimed for her head being dragged down. His eyes full of terror as he took a final breath and was swallowed up by the earth. *Time's up...*

Adrenaline pumped through her. With the sword clasped tightly to her chest she set into a mad dash, rushing headlong for the door, clearing the room as the Draugr gave chase. She rushed through the corridors that would lead her to the main hall, and the sin-eater.

"SIN...!"

All around her the corridors echoed with the screams of men and women, underscored by the unmistakable moans of the dead.

“AMARA!”

5

VENDETTA OF THE DEITIES

THE SOUND OF HER NAME NEARLY CAUSED HER KNEES TO BUCKLE, THE sense of relief overwhelming. He was alive, he was looking for her, they would survive.

Her power was too depleted to force open a gateway, but with the sin-eater's help they could reach one of the main portals outside of the capital, from there she could return directly to Asurim.

"SIN, OVER HERE!"

More than likely he couldn't hear her over the cacophony surrounding them. From every corner of the temple, agonized cries filled the air as the dead hunted the living. Her creatures devouring their flesh even as the Draugr grabbed hold, and dragging both the living and the undead into the ground.

An imprint of magic brushed her senses as a gateway began to manifest directly behind the sin-eater, a portal opening. Smart demon that he was, Sin had likely sent for help.

Breathing was becoming more of a struggle with every hurried step she took towards him, all her concentration focused on dodging the grabby hands which kept popping out of the ground. Just how many dead had the Ghata'n buried here? This was the reason warlocks considered burials a sacrilege, there were simply too many uses for a dead body, none of which were particularly pleasant.

Despite her effort, her pace was faltering, her body already giving out. Each step sending a wave of pain through her abdomen. Still she moved,

her grip on the sword never easing, her eyes fixed upon the sin-eater and the portal at his back. *Just a bit farther…*

A blinding flash of light engulfed the hall, and when her vision adjusted, it was to discover the portal gone—and the demon along with it.

"No…"

This time her legs did give out, her knees connecting with sand and stone as not relief, but disappointment robbed her of strength. *He left me behind.*

She mentally commanded herself to get back up, to move, to make it to the portal outside the city walls. Her legs refused.

Her chest ached at the betrayal she felt, while logically she understood all too well why Cassius had made the rational choice to flee the Temple without her. "He left me behind…"

In his position, she would've done the same thing. *Wouldn't I?*

She liked to believe she would have.

"Does this mean you're finally ready to join me, bride?"

Only one had the audacity to call her such, and as a result she had gained the moniker of death's runaway bride.

Amara had been wondering how long it would take before he made his appearance. Namtar, her personal angel of death, arriving in hope that today would finally be her death day, the day he gets to collect her soul. At least his presence served to keep the dead at bay, until he was done gloating and decided it was time for her to die.

"I could say that it's a pleasure to see you again Namtar, but we both know I'd be lying."

Her fingers clenched around the sheath of the sword, keeping it tight to her chest lest he tried to take it from her. She was so close to ridding herself of the curse — and of him — giving up was not an option.

"Ah, the Sword of Divine Justice. If I knew any better, I would start to believe you wish to be rid of me. I understand that my curse killing your sisters created some hard feelings, but as you so eloquently put it earlier — you should have surrendered your soul to me when I asked nicely."

Namtar, the Sumerian god of death and pestilence had been a plague upon her existence ever since she'd resurfaced from Hell, declaring ownership of her soul after having bartered a deal with her mother.

She sensed his energy moments before Namtar himself stepped out of the shadows. Everything carried an energy imprint which served as a

calling card, a unique feel and scent; his conjured mental images of slimy tentacles sliding along bared skin, and its scent was reminiscent to that of a festering wound. It was only with great effort she was able to hold back a shudder of revulsion when he got close enough to stand over her.

As always, Namtar kept his form concealed beneath a muddy brown cloak and drawn hood, but she had seen enough to know that the entire length of his body was bound in burial wrappings. Despite their many confrontations through the century, she'd never seen more than his eyes, his face hidden behind a mask of mirror glass.

"Why do you persist on forcing my hand against you, priestess? Be my bride, give me what's rightfully mine, give me eternal life. In return I'll ensure your death is relatively painless."

Those who had no soul to anchor them, like the gods, required faith and worship to survive, lest they become forgotten and fade. Mortal and immortal alike believed in death, but through the years death had acquired many forms and many names, Namtar was being forgotten. Thus, he needed a compatible soul to help anchor him, that of a high priestess.

"Tempting... but, no." She managed a grin, the gesture lacking any true humor.

The real problem for Namtar presented itself in the fact he couldn't kill her. In order to harvest her soul, she'd need to either surrender it willingly, or her life ended by a death not of his making. His power was vast, but not limitless, and even gods had rules they were bound to.

For as long as Amara continued to live, her soul belonged to her, and she was hellbent on keeping it that way.

"Have it your way then, priestess. I'll enjoy seeing you being torn apart by your own creatures." Namtar dissipated back into the shadows, and along with him went the control he held over the undead.

Adrenaline and fear could no longer coax her injured and spent body into moving, her knees rooted to the ground. As if laying in wait for her, hands marked by decay rose up from the ground to wrap around her legs; the Draugr had caught their prey.

Her head struck stone when the undead rushed her, biting into her flesh even as the Draugr began to pull her into the ground. She felt their teeth sink into her arms, and despite her firm resolve not to scream, she did. Who knew a bite could hurt so damned much? Her struggle only served to

fuel their frenzy as they chewed their way through skin, muscle, and sinew. Crunching into bone.

She was morbid enough to have often wondered on how she would meet her eventual demise, ironically, being devoured by her own creations had never even crossed her mind.

Her gaze searched and found Namtar seated comfortably upon a collapsed column, watching the show while waiting for her to die. Surely this couldn't be her end? She refused. Her work was not yet complete, there was vengeance left to claim. Five names to erase, five lives to end. Then and only then would she consider death an option.

Still, it wouldn't be long before either zombie or Draugr tore into her neck, as soon as cortex and brain were severed... not even an immortal could regenerate. She had one final move available on the game-board, the odds of it working close to nil. Still she had to try, had to live….

Fighting against survival instinct, she closed her eyes, forced her mind to separate from body and connect with the etheric planes. Crossing the veil which separated life from death, to enter the realm of spirit where the primordial gods dwelled.

"Kali Ma, great goddess of destruction and protection, I implore you to hear my call, answer my plea. Kali Ma—save me."

The ground beneath her gave, sand covering her as she sank down. She tried to focus on her task, but could feel the grip of the Draugr as they pulled her into her grave, and the bite of the undead who refused to relinquish their meal. Pain and fear won out, planting her firmly back into her body.

"I will fucking haunt you Namtar, mark my words. My soul will offer you no peace!"

"I have no need for peace, only life. Time to die, priestess…"

In that moment she realized she was actually going die in this place, buried beneath Ghata'n soil. Her soul was heavy with the weight of regret. She'd failed to protect his life, and now would fail to avenge his death. With his soul destroyed and hers about to be swallowed by a Sumerian death god—they would never again meet.

Cassius

Dark flames burst up around her, black fire enveloping her into its embrace, burning away the touch of the undead while leaving her own flesh unmarked.

“KALI, THIS IS NONE OF YOUR CONCERN!”

Namtar’s angered bellow caused the already unstable temple to tremble, his rage turning into a physical manifestation of destruction by turning its ruin into rubble.

“Praise be Kali.”

The words formed a binding agreement, with her accepting the intervention offered by the goddess, knowing Kali would one day demand payment in turn. That however was tomorrow’s worry, today she would live. Her body was growing weightless as portal opened directly beneath her, the next moment she fell through.

In that void she drifted for what felt like an eternity, clinging to the sword as if it were a life preserver rather than a mythical, god killing weapon. When she was finally tossed out, it was to land upon cold, hard surface.

“Took you long enough Highness, we were just about to send out a rescue team to ensure you weren’t up to any troub… dark gods, what’s happened to you?”

She recognized the deeply accented voice as belonging to Dominus Oberith, one of the nine rulers of Asurim, and her advisor. Unable to collect her wits enough to think of a flippant retort, she instead lifted up her arm to reveal the holy sword clasped within her grip.

“You promised us you’d only go to confirm its existence.” His tone was always stern, but she could clearly hear his concern and panic laced within.

It took effort, but she finally managed to lift her head up from the onyx stone floor to smirk up at him.

“Confirmed…”

Her Dominus looked furious as he reached for her, yet he was gentle when collecting her chewed up and stabbed through body off the floor.

“Er-Agate prepare her chambers and have En-Rasputin fetched this instant. The Sarratum has been injured.”

Despite her wish to remain conscious, her tired eyes simply refused to obey, falling shut as soon as the rush of adrenaline washed out. It didn’t truly matter, for she was alive, she was safe, and she had collected the sword.

6

THIS WAS UNEXPECTED

THE TEMPLE WAS IN CHAOS. SHEETS OF MARBLE SLID ONTO THE CRACKING floors, crumbling to dust on impact, the groans and snarls of the undead sounding off in waves between explosions of rock. He watched in horror as the temple maidens he'd de-maidened just moments prior fell victim to the ravenous flesh-eating monsters his priestess had called up.

His priestess. She was in this melee somewhere… alive? Would she have allowed her creatures to slip her control if she were?

The sweet song of benediction came in the form of his name. Amara called for him, her voice full of panic. He caught sight of her stumbling, narrowly avoiding the grasping dead and his own panic notched to uncontainable levels. Heat flared around him. Flames. Hell-flame… had he done this?

The flames spread and opened, revealing a vortex at the center, a portal that smelled like home. Amara… she was reaching for him, the portal pulling at him. He moved to take a step towards her, and that was all the imbalance the excessive gravity needed, sucking him back through the flames before he could even finish calling out her name.

He was pulled through a sound barrier, his ears popped, his arms flung out, dropping the borrowed sword, his consciousness lagging. He'd taken in too much power, it kept hitting him in waves, threatening to drag him under. The portal didn't lead home. It should've been as simple as stepping over a seam between realities, the air inside had switched from welcoming and comfort to suffocating oppression.

When he finally landed hard on his ass, he couldn’t get a sense of his surroundings. He rubbed a hand over his bleary face and blinked open his eyes.

His father stared down at him, the full glory of his power radiating. His inky black wings were spread wide, his skin a glowing blur.

Cassius scrambled to his feet, keeping his head down, unable to look upon his father in all his splendor. There was no denying his celestial ancestry when he looked like this. No denying his anger either. It pervaded all senses.

“Did you not think I would find a way to summon you?” His father’s voice boomed, Cass held himself firm, though his insides shrank back. “My own son.” His voice softened, a waspish edge to it, making Cass’s head buzz with a thousand thoughts.

He knew.

His father’s hand settled on his shoulder and Cass finally looked up at him. At six and a half feet tall himself, his father was one of the few beings he looked up to.

Asmodeus dimmed his essence, his face settling into marble coldness.

“I’ve had nothing but time to think, Cassius. Five long years of picking apart patterns.”

Cass swallowed hard. Had he figured out how they had maneuvered him into losing his throne?

“I would be proud. If it hadn’t been me you were acting against.”

He had.

“All things end in time,” he said, swallowing again, trying to ease the dryness in his throat.

His father’s hand squeezed his shoulder, a touch too tight to be comfortable.

“I am a god, boy. Created from the fabric of time. I have no beginning and no end.” Asmodeus’s voice boomed once again, echoing through the vast emptiness of this realm.

Cass wasn’t certain about his father’s origins. The stories were varied, some having him as a being created by the powerful Yahweh to act as sentinel, some claimed he’d been a favored son. Whichever the case, he highly suspected the designation of ‘god’ to be one his sire had taken upon himself.

His father crooked a finger under Cass’s chin, tilting it up, studying him. Leaving him little choice but to meet his father’s pale blue eyes, their color one of the many differences between them. Try as he might, he could never remember what his mother looked like, but he knew he took after her.

“You’ve taken on more power?” His father appeared more curious than angry.

He cleared his throat. “Yes, sir.”

His father looked into his eyes, searching, then let out a chuff that might’ve been a laugh.

“Indeed. My blood runs strong in you.” He gripped Cass’s shoulder again, leading him to a seating area.

The room looked similar to his father’s offices in the fortress, with the feeling of being in the center of a vacuum, as though this room as it appeared was the only thing that existed in whatever realm they were in.

Asmodeus took a seat first, gesturing to the chair beside him. Cass perched on the edge, discomfort blaring through him. He wasn’t good at playing games directly against his father, his mind was too sharp and thoughts too varied to predict.

A glass was shoved toward him, the pungent scent of port wafting out of it.

“Drink. It’s not poisoned.”

His father’s eyes assessed, knowledge shining from within their depths. He took a sip, watching his father over the rim of the glass, not certain what to expect.

“You’re holding my throne?” Asmodeus asked sipping from his own glass. “Enjoying all the plotting and scheming?”

Now they were just to have a friendly family chat? His gut was beginning to hurt, the anticipation tying it up in knots.

“I am. They fear you, and so offer me courtesy.”

“Courtesy does not make kings, boy. You’ll have to show them your might. I know you’re capable, I can feel your power.” He scented the air, breathing deeply. “And you’ve fed well. Basileus is paving ground for you?”

His gut spasmed again. He’d left Bas to stand regent as he’d recklessly traversed the mortal realm. It had been a wildly irresponsible move, he could see that now.

Bas was leading him into many things, but he wasn't sure from a political aspect, if he was in Cass's corner. Not entirely.

"Basileus is currently negotiating with my sis… Glasya. She requested my assistance and expected I'd come running." His lips tilted up as he studied the contents of his glass, taking another sip as he carefully thought out his words. "I would not bend."

Nor would he sign any deals with her, treachery ran strong in his family. Maintaining peace had been seen to through Basileus, his father's herald and right hand.

Asmodeus nodded. "Exert your power. Crush them under heel if you must. You live in a world where might makes right, and you have the might, if not the heart."

"I'm learning."

"So you are."

Cass finished off his drink and looked around. There had to be a way out. He'd left her there and didn't feel right about it.

"I can summon you when I choose." His father peered up at him, meeting his eyes once more. "It's on you to keep the Archdukes reined in. Most are loyal to me, but more have been searching for a weakness."

Asmodeus stood and Cass jumped to his feet.

"And you are a weakness, boy. Until you accept what needs to be done." His father reached for him again, laying his hand on Cass's stomach, right under his ribcage.

A burning pain ripped through him, he felt his father's mark singe right to his very essence, siphoning his new-found power.

"Give your sister my regards," his father said, turning from him to hunch over his drink.

In a blink he was in his bedroom in the Nessus fortress, his breaths coming out as pants, his chest too tight to take anything more than a gasp of air, his insides quaking as the room spun around him. He recognized this feeling. He needed his poisons…

Already on the verge of blacking out, his hands grasped around on his dresser, fumbling to open the case and pull out the stopper on a vial. Without so much as a pause he tossed the contents to the back of his throat, the less of the vile liquid to touch his tongue, the less of acrid aftertaste to linger. Poison, his cure.

His priestess had known of his condition and seen to his needs. Amara.

He’d left her there. He would need to go back, they had an alliance, and no one else could sit on that treacherous warlock throne.

He’d need to feed first, his energy so depleted he was shaking. His father had taken everything, the sigil he’d marked him with burned, siphoning power like a greedy gaping maw.

He waited until his veins filled with blistering heat, until his body was so focused on the agonizing poison flowing through it, he could finally take a deep breath, then swung open his door, summoning the closest minion, ordering women to be brought up.

Feed. Then find her.

7

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

AMARA'S EYES CRACKED OPEN TO REVEAL THE FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS OF her private chambers. It was nighttime, the bright fire within the hearth on the opposite side of the room keeping most of the darkness at bay. The air within the room felt warm, yet she was freezing.

Awareness was slow to come, her thoughts sluggish, her body too heavy to move. A well-known side effect of the poison master's sleeping tincture. To Rasputin's credit, his concoctions vile as they might be, never failed to deliver on their promise. Already the burning pain in her abdomen had subsided to a dull throb.

With effort she coaxed her hand to move along her abdomen, her fingers gently prodding at the angry gash on her belly, finding the wound sutured closed, the skin already knitting together. At this rate, the laceration would take only a few days to heal and was unlikely to leave even the faintest scar.

She licked her lips, her tongue coming away coated with the healing balm they'd been coated with; the comforting scent of medicinal herbs, verbena and magick soothing, despite the unpleasant taste.

With a deep sigh she forced herself to recount the events which had led to her injuries. The Sword had been obtained, but the cost had been high. By summoning the Draugr, she'd damned not just a city, but an entire civilization.

Had it not been for Kali-ma, she'd never have made it out of Ghata'n alive.

Offerings to the goddess would need to be made, worship offered in gratitude for her intervention. It was only a matter of time before the goddess would demand payment for her assistance. Nothing came for free, not even divine intervention.

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips at the recollection of Namtar's rage. She held no illusions as to why she'd been offered help, knowing the Hindu Death Goddess would surely feel pleased at having thwarted the Sumerian Death God. Their rivalry was legendary, and supposedly stemmed from a millennia old feud. Which had been the reason why she had invoked the goddess. While many believed her to be a deity of evil, she was in fact patroness of rage and bloodlust. Neutral. Kali was many things, but not cruel, which could not be said of Namtar.

Ancient records described Namtar as a kind and merciful deity at the dawn of Sumerian civilization. It was the time when the death god had worked opposite Inanna herself. Where the goddess was tasked to bring new life, he'd been given the sacred duty of ending it. As time passed, Namtar became increasingly resentful of the fact that mortals celebrated Inanna, while he was met with grief and fear. In his hatred, he unleashed scourges and plagues upon Gaia. These acts earning him a secondary title, God of Pestilence.

As his mercy for mankind faded, so did his beauty, marking the god with the disfigurements and ulcers of leprosy. It was then that many of the ancient ones turned away from the death god, repulsed by both his actions and appearance.

Amara herself had experienced the extent of Namtar's cruelty when he'd come to her one hundred years earlier, demanding her soul in payment for her mother's crown. When she'd refused, he retaliated by placing a curse on her.

Death will come swiftly for any foolish enough to love you.

It had sounded like a curse borrowed from a fairy-tale book, a cliché even. She hadn't even given it much thought at first. After all, her heart had died alongside her Cassius. Although having lost her capacity for love, she'd still cared deeply for her three sisters.

After four hundred years of imprisonment in Hell, Amara had returned to them broken. Her sisters had understood and accepted her, and miraculously, they'd loved her despite her inability to reciprocate. And because they loved her, death had come for them.

The image of their lifeless bodies flashed before her mind's eye, expressions frozen and contorted from pain. Echoes of the terror they had endured reflected within sightless eyes. Their end hadn't been gentle nor swift. She could never purge that memory from her mind, but she could try to replace it with a new one — that of Namtar's death. She now had the Sword to see it done.

And she had allies. Her mentor, the Dark Fae King had protected her from Namtar's wrath, while helping her in her search for a way to end the old god. Gwynn had taught her how to summon the darkness and master its magicks, ensured she'd grow strong enough to hold her own against the death god. He had been the one to unearth the lore of the Sword, her oracle, Domina Elmira then tracking it to Ghata'n. Namtar's days were numbered.

A soft hand moved across her forehead, startling her back into awareness.

"Highness how is it you're awake? They gave you enough draft to sedate a hell-beast. Dark gods, but you're chilled to the bone."

She recognized the gentle voice of Er-Agate, her first attendant, and sighed softly when warm blankets settled over her. She had been about to ask about the Sword when Agate turned from her.

"Pack everything of value carefully and move it to the cellars."

Figures entered her chambers and moved to obey her attendant's orders.

"Agate, what's happening?"

Forming words was a struggle, the effort of trying to sit up immediately sending a burst of pain through her abdomen, shooting down until her legs felt as if they'd caught fire.

"Be at ease Sarratum-sa, it's merely precautionary. Your possessions will be safer locked away from greedy warlock fingers in your absence."

"My what?"

Cold metal pressed against her lips, offering her another dose of the vile tonic. Clever Agate, her attendant well enough acquainted with her stubborn nature to not give her opportunity to protest. That, however, didn't stop Amara from pinning her attendant with the foulest glare she could muster. To which the cheeky warlock responded with a self satisfied smile.

“We’ve been under attack since your return, there are factions wanting to avenge the fall of Ghata’n. Is it true you summoned the Draugr?”

Agate’s smirk turned into a grimace at her nod of affirmation, a hard shudder visibly wracking through her attendant.

“The council of Dominae agreed it would be best to temporarily move both yourself and the sword to the realm of Gaia, amongst the humans. They believe the ley-lines scattered across the mortal realm are powerful enough to dampen the sword’s divine imprint, and it will keep you safe in case of an invasion.”

“I’m not fleeing my own realm…”

She struggled to sit up, the world tilting, her vision growing dark and sound growing distant, the sleeping tincture already taking effect.

“Not... going…”

That same warm hand brushed her forehead, weightlessness following as she felt her body lifted off the bed. Then there was nothing but darkness as the abyss consumed her.

“Rest and recover, Sarratum-sa. The sword is kept safe, as are you.”

As Amara dwelled through the shadowlands of her dreams, a tall figure revealed himself there, waiting. She approached until she was close enough to see his eyes, lifeless, dark brown and cold as unlit coal. The sin-eater.

Yet as soon as his gaze locked with hers, Hellfire began to spark within their depths, molten gold and deep crimson. She blinked. And when their gazes met, she found eyes of burning embers.

“Cassius…”

8

SOUNDS A LOT LIKE ‘NOT MY PROBLEM’

He paced in front of his throne, urgency and frustration riding him. He needed Amara on the Asurian throne, more than he’d ever admit to her. His power was tricky and uncertain, she was the constant he needed as anchor. He was trying to figure out how to get back to her, his thoughts weren’t cooperating. They kept circling back to his father. His father knew. Somehow, he’d figured out all the complex maneuvering, the plotting and set-ups.

He and the Priestess had set up the fall of Asmodeus over the span of a century, gently nudging events and misleading information to point in his father’s direction in order to set in motion his exile from Hell. As a result of their scheming, Asmodeus had lost his seat on the Council and been banished by Celestials. He hadn’t thought his father would figure out the role he’d played in his downfall so soon.

As King of all the Hells, his position was titular, actual responsibility minimal. All he’d had to do was remain in his realm, seen and feared. His thirst for freedom, his arrogance believing he was finally free of his father’s rule had made him reckless. He’d been running for the past five years, basking in his newfound freedom in the mortal realm.

The murmurings of uprising were constant, saying he was unfit to be king. Possibly so, but the throne belonged to him, by right of inheritance. He’d suffered at his father’s hand, forced to submit in order to be molded from prince to monarch. The throne was his, and he’d not give it up for anything.

Since his return to the Nessus, the seat of his rule, his mood had been soured by frustration. His fingers dug through his hair again, hesitating once he realized. Odd, he couldn't recall ever possessing that particular habit before.

It was her fault. Two days and he'd heard nothing of the warlock's fate. At his command Basileus had sent ambassadors to Asurim, but neither they nor the spies he kept within her court had reported seeing her. Amara's council ruled in her absence and the realm had been closed off to visitors. Had he let her die in that godforsaken place?

My Mara...

The sound of shocked murmurs within the hall interrupted his brooding, making him look up to find a familiar form approaching. Andrus, son of Eros, husband to his only friend and at times stand-in mother, the Fae Queen Verity. What, by all the Hells, was a lesser god doing in his Nessus?

He eased slowly up from his throne, the poison still lingering in his system, and walked down his dais to greet Andrus.

"Cassius." Andrus nodded, ignoring all the Demons surrounding them.

"Andrus. Baby must be getting big?" He turned to ask, trying to guess the reason for this visit.

"Did you know?" Andrus asked as they moved toward the doorway that led out of the busy hall.

"Did I know…?" Cass shook his head, brows knitted in confusion. "Sorry, what am I supposed to know exactly?"

"About my daughter, my Elodie?" Andrus kept pace beside him, keeping his voice hushed as they traversed the busy halls. "How much do you know about the Huntsman?"

Cass growled low, his step faltering. The Huntsman, the Dark Fae King. He'd made inquiries about the mad king in the past, mainly because of his involvement with Amara.

"Only that he is King of the Dark Fae, and that he is rumored to suffer bouts of madness."

Andrus whipped back around, the air surrounding him blurring.

"She sold off my daughter to him." Andrus snarled, then took a deep breath.

"She...what?" Cass slowed his pace, wanting to maintain some distance between him and the God. "Verity did?"

“Verity betrothed our baby girl to the Dark King before she was even born.” Andrus spoke slowly, waiting for Cass to catch up, resting his hands on the top of his head and blowing out a long breath.

Cass’s thoughts were still sluggish from his last bout of poisoning, so it took him a moment to process. Although he personally considered the practice to be unappealing, the betrothing of an infant to the mother’s choice of suitor was a common enough practice within the Realms. Some even offered their first born up to demons or dark gods in exchange for favor, even his father had accepted such contracts in the past in order to feed innocent souls to the Hells.

Still the news came as a shock, not only because it seemed highly out of character for gentle and kind Verity to do such a thing, but also because the Priestess and the Dark King were involved — to his knowledge, the two had become lovers soon after had Cass helped her escape his father's prison. It had always been his understanding they’d end up as each other’s consorts, however that would work.

“But that’s not why I came,” Andrus said with a sharp motion of his hand towards the door to Cass’s private suites, “this is a conversation best had in private.”

“Is the world ending? That’s the only reason I can think of for you to bother entering my Realms,” Cass said, opening the door.

Andrus’s eyes sparkled, then darkened once more. “There have been some concerns in that regard. I’m here because you and the Warlock Queen have somehow managed to unearth the Sword of Divine Justice.”

Cass looked around to see if anyone heard before ushering Andrus into his sitting room, shutting the door tightly behind them.

“We might have.” He leaned against the door, narrowing his eyes at the young god who was helping himself to the liquor strewn across the side table.

Andrus turned back to him, swirling the liquid in a tumbler, his eyes back to violet.

“Have you any idea what this signifies?” He took a sip, watching Cass carefully.

“I know it’s been said to have the power to slay a god.” Cass said, pouring himself a drink.

Andrus stilled. “You have to be on the side of truth to be able to wield it as a weapon. I know it has killed one of my kind at least once before.”

“Would it work on my kind?”

Would it work on his father?

Andrus studied him carefully, then stood to stare into the empty fireplace.

“Perhaps, but killing is only a side effect of the sword’s true power. It’s a sentient weapon, with a will of its own, imbued with the divine purpose of unmaking injustice. As such, death is not guaranteed, as it often fails to solve the problem.”

Maybe Mara had been on to something. He needed that sword, even if that meant he had to return to the zombie infested Ghata’n to retrieve it.

He sat, covering his shudder of revulsion by slumping back into the worn leather sofa, Andrus perching on the chair beside.

“Justice is all I ask,” he said quietly, noting how Andrus’s eyes moved back to his, scanning his face.

The intrusive god merely nodded. “The Sword brings greater significance than justice. The fact that it has resurfaced,” he paused, thoughtful. “More or less, it’s a harbinger, ever since its discovery the tides of fate have altered and the gods grow concerned.”

Cass shrugged and sipped at his drink. This was none of his concern.

And you’ll free me? I’m supposed to just trust *you?*

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the scene which kept intruding upon his mind. Apparently, Amara shouldn’t have trusted him. He freed her from her prison and delivered her to her death. He stifled a shudder at the memory of the zombies.

“Your expression betrays you Cassius. Are you thinking about the Warlock Queen?” Andrus raised a brow, insinuating something.

His hand absently rubbed across his chest, where some of Amara’s essence had entwined with his own, a side effect from the vow he’d made her swear, the sigil hidden by glamour; a secret only two beings knew.

“Not surprising considering the topic of conversation. I left her there and I’m beginning to fear she may not have survived.”

“That’s not the story Kali tells.” Andrus’s gaze was locked on his, as if to search for a reaction while he spoke.

“The Goddess claims to have snatched Amara from death’s embrace only moments before Namtar could lay claim to her. She’s been bragging about it ever since. Queen Amara was hurt during her escape, but remains very much alive. And more importantly, she has the sword.”

“She’s alive.”

He’d left her with her undead creatures, ones ravenous for living flesh, no longer in her control, and she survived. Of course she had, he was a fool for not realizing it sooner, his priestess was simply too stubborn to die.

She had secured the sword… that could possibly be the end to his father for good, ‘god’ or no.

“This is the reason I came here to speak with you, they want that sword.” Andrus stood and refilled his drink, tipping it back to swallow in one gulp.

“I need that sword,” Cass said, baring his teeth and getting to his feet. “My need supersedes your wants.” He thought for a moment. “*Who* wants it?”

Andrus nodded, his eyes lit up. “The Council. I told you the sword is regarded to be a harbinger, and as such there are several prophecies attached to it. Most of them involve the end of times, the Apocalypse.”

“So why come to me? I don’t have it on my person. You just stated that Amara has it in her possession.” He ran a hand into his hair, the need to see her, to ensure for himself that the god spoke truth nearly suffocating him.

“The warlock is out of our reach. Her contract with the Death God ensures the rest of us keep our hands off, Namtar is not one to cross. Kali is the only one powerful and resentful enough to thwart him. But unlike the rest of us, that particular Goddess rather enjoys the prospect of Armageddon.”

Andrus set his glass down and walked back to where Cass stood. “I came to you hoping you could ask her for it.”

Contract with the Death God… had Amara bargained with the Sumerian God when she already owed allegiance to him? He’d heard whispers, chose not to believe them. Despite her trickster nature, his Priestess had never given her word lightly.

“No offense Andrus, but the problems of the Gods are of no concern to me. Mortals and deities may not survive an Apocalypse, but Hell will.”

It had been his suggestion to Amara that her warlocks start worshipping the Hells in an even exchange for infernal power, as a result both races had grown stronger for it. As long as warlocks and demons continued to be allies, they could survive without the sins and faith of

mortal kind. An Apocalypse would certainly weaken, but not destroy their realms.

Andrus stared at him for a moment.

“How can you say such a thing? Have you no care for your mother? The rest of your family?” He shook his head then turned back to the fireplace.

Cass let that sink in, shoving it to the back of his mind. His father had said she was no one. *Not worthy*.

“Perhaps if I bound you to my daughter, it would void the bargain with Gwynn…” Andrus absently murmured.

Cass jumped to his feet. “You would subject your daughter to this,” he gestured around, then to himself with a shaking hand, “I have no need for a consort.”

“*Finish what you started sin-eater. I dare you,” Amara hissed from her manacles. “You came to end me? Do it.”*

He wasn’t *safe* for a consort.

“I would do anything to see her free of the Mad King, Cassius. At least you have the pedigree to match my line.”

He snapped out of his thoughts.

“I have nothing,” he growled, “I’m demon born and have given my life over to the upkeep of the Hells, this is what you would condemn your daughter to by binding her to me. A life in Hell, with a man who could never love her.”

Andrus nodded. “I’ll take my leave then. I must go see to my wife and see if perhaps any of her people know how to break a damned Faery bargain.”

With a nod, Andrus ripped open a portal in the fabric of the very universe, right in the center of Cass’s hearth, then turned back to Cass.

“Your Priestess has traveled to her home in the mortal realm, in case you wanted to find her. We need that Sword, Cassius.” He stepped through the portal and disappeared.

That urgency he’d felt before took on a desperate note. If Andrus had seen it necessary to lower himself from his godly perch to enter the Nessus in search of him, then Hells only knew who or what would be coming after the Priestess with the intent of claiming that sword.

9

THE THING ABOUT ALLIES

HE COULD COUNT HIS ALLIES ON ONE HAND—*TRUSTED* ALLIES ON ONE finger. Amara, Queen of Asurim, his Priestess; and only because she had no choice in the matter. To ensure her loyalty he had offered her freedom on the condition she bind herself to him with an unbreakable oath, one preventing her from ever conspiring against him, as he vowed the same.

I vow to stand by your side, as equals, to be your sword, to wield and protect, my unwavering loyalty belongs to you—for as long as you belong to me.

Amara had proven a valuable asset, and for as little as the priestess wanted to do with him, he actually liked her. He found her sharp tongue and quick wit amusing, her magic beyond valuable, her proximity strangely comforting.

All the worry about her betraying him, and he'd been the one to fail her.

Through her scheming and his charm, they'd ensured his father's deposition, through joined battle they had reclaimed her realm and crown. They'd plundered side by side for more than a century, two greedy and selfish beings bound by contract not to betray one another. It was what they knew.

His chest eased into a normal breathing rhythm when he laid eyes on her. His eyes devoured every inch of her parchment pale skin. Her hair was a light shade of violet today, covering her face as she shut her bathroom

door behind her. His mouth curled up into a grin — the only thing covering her was a towel.

He'd finally caught the Priestess off-guard.

Her eyes were a vibrant shade of cyan blue, they were the first thing he always noticed about her, they gleamed like backlit sapphires. Right now, they were narrowed into daggers and he fought down the little thrill that rose up inside. Because he had the upper hand. He told himself that as he scanned every inch of her for injury, trying to keep an impassive expression on his face.

"How are you in my house?" She hissed out and stepped back closer to the doorway she'd just exited. "WHY are you in my house?" Her hands were clutching tight to the towel covering her chest.

He straightened his stance, trying to cover up the wince. His bones still throbbed from the poison, even after a night and entire day had passed, the effects lingered, his usual rapid healing no defense against whatever wicked concoction the Priestess had contrived.

An indignant sort of anger started buzzing through his chest. She'd obviously ended up better off than he had, *she* hadn't had to deal with the likes of his father. All that worry and she was well enough to be lounging about in towels in the middle of the day.

She inched toward the open door of her bedroom, and he stepped closer. She smelled like gardenias and tart cherries. Very unlike her normal scent, which left him even more flustered.

He grabbed a bright red apple from the bowl placed upon an antique coffee table and Amara's arm, steering her away from her attempted retreat and into her inner sanctuary.

"You got the Sword?" He didn't look as she grabbed the loosened towel.

After his nice visit with his father, the thought of owning a weapon with the power of the Divine Sword was more than temptation. It offered finality.

Amara nodded slowly, her glowing eyes narrowing. "I did."

Music played from some hidden speakers, classical violins, their song soft and melodious, easing the tension that was making his head pound. He slouched into her armchair and threw his feet up onto the table, biting into the apple and taking a fully restorative breath. He felt safe with her, always had.

“So that was quite the ride.” Her eyes gleamed at his attempt at humor. “Honestly glad to see you made it out of that mess.”

Had to play it cool. It wouldn’t do for her to think he’d actually been concerned. Never mind to what extent.

“Wouldn’t have gone in without a solid plan.” Her chin notched, the glow fading from her eyes.

“That last dose you sent me was particularly nasty.” He looked over at her from under his lashes. “I think it might have left my brain a little mushy.”

She smirked, finally relaxing with the familiar topic. She’d been dosing him with potions and poisons for years, each getting progressively nastier. Nasty and necessary, they offered his contraception and his oblivion, he craved the mindless physical release.

“You used it already?” She spoke with melodious tone as she settled onto the adjacent couch. “Tell me how my poison made you feel,” she purred.

“Like I was burning alive.” His voice was a low rasp. “Like my skin was being flayed from my bones.” He turned to face her. “I bled from my ears.”

She smiled brightly. “Naughty demon. You were supposed to document your findings for me. I have yet to best En-Rasputin and his vicious concoctions.”

“So, you made it out alive,” Cass said, looking down at the apple core and debating where to toss it. The room was filled with furniture and shelves of books, fabric draped everywhere, not a trashcan in sight.

“I didn’t leave you intentionally. Just so you know. My power…” He leaned up and set the apple on the coffee table, waiting for her to tease him about being ridiculous.

“I can feel it oozing off you even now Sin. It’s most delicious.” Her eyelids lowered as she gave him a once-over. “Power suits you.” She neatly avoided the topic yet again.

“I need that Sword,” he said, focusing his attention back on her.

He could just take it, use it to end his father… he’d give it back to her before considering giving it to any of the gods.

“I need it myself, demon. Thus, all the trouble I went through to get it.”

“We,” Cass said, running his hand down his face, trying to gather his wits. “The trouble *we* went through.”

She snorted softly. “Was it so troubling to bury yourself balls deep in a few maidens?”

There was a waspish edge to her voice that made Cass study her expression, trying to understand. Was she jealous? The reason they worked so well together was because they didn’t see each other as potential conquests. They had a bargain. They made an excellent team, nothing more.

Mara cleared her throat and averted her gaze.

“He was there, at the temple. He saw me grab the sword,” she whispered, her bright eyes flitting around the room before meeting his again.

Cass shook his head, his forehead creasing in confusion.

“Namtar,” she whispered so quietly, she was nearly mouthing the word.

He’d seen Mara and the Huntsman together through the years, he knew they were involved. Whispers of her being betrothed to the ancient death god, were simply that, abstract and unproven gossip, he’d never given credence to them.

“What of it, Mara?” He couldn’t stifle the sting of jealousy that hit him in the chest with her admission. She belonged to him, the one thing he had untainted by the Hells he’d been raised in, the one thing untainted by his father’s greed.

Her mouth flattened, expression closed off.

She would just give him the sword?

“Do you think he could even wield it?”

She scoffed delicately. “He wouldn’t want to wield it, just wouldn’t want me to.”

She didn’t seem happy about the development. He breathed a tad easier knowing he hadn’t helped her collect the sword as a wedding gift or some shit.

“So, you don’t want... Namtar to have it?” The word ‘betrothed’ caught in his throat, refusing to come out.

Her eyes came back to his, banked fury shining from their odd-colored depths. “The only time Namtar will get that sword will be the moment I run him through with it.”

Air re-filled his lungs.

“Do you think it’ll work against my father?” Cass broke down and asked. If anyone understood the danger his father represented it was Mara, who had been his prisoner.

Mara’s eyes met his, and he thought there was actual sorrow reflected in their depths.

Even as they sat here, he could feel the pull of his father's sigil, draining him. He didn’t even have the energy to explain to her how badly he needed this.

“Perhaps,” she purred and moved forward in her seat, closing the distance between them. “We can come to an agreement.”

Damn. His feet dropped to the floor, then he crossed an ankle over his thigh, trying to hide his growing erection. He wasn’t immune to her charms. Not at all.

In fact, everything about her called to him, from her hair which was a different color each time he saw her, the shade of her eyes that couldn’t exist in nature, to the gentle slopes of her curves. Especially with them spilling out of a towel.

He’d distanced himself, did everything he could *not* to notice. They were already bound by warlock contract, he was already more entwined with her than any other female. He instinctively knew he wouldn’t survive getting more deeply involved.

His eyes were cold once more when they met hers.

“You want to make a deal with a demon, love?” he teased, pouring on the charm, something inside him shrinking back at seeing her expression close off once more.

“If the sword holds true to legend, I’ll only be needing it for a short time. Then I’ll help you with your father.” She stood, adjusting her towel before wandering off towards the privacy of her bedroom, raising her voice so he’d still hear her.

He followed instead, leaning against her doorway.

“This seems like a familiar bargain,” he said, his eyes taking in every naked inch of her flesh.

She turned back around with a gasp, then with a defiant notch of her chin, she brazenly pulled up flimsy lace panties, his eyes glued to the curves they now concealed.

Their bond was based on a similar deal, though the original stipulations had been met, and here they were, still bound.

“I have my own pests to deal with first, sin-eater.”

10

OOPS. DID I DO THAT?

AT THE SOUND OF HIS STIFLED GROAN SHE TURNED TO DISCOVER HIS roaming gaze, a clear breach in unspoken boundaries between them. Damn him. Purposely or not, the demon was distracting her. She would not be tricked into surrendering her sword. True to nature, the self-centered lout had wasted no time in figuring out a way to use *her* sword to his own advantage.

Still, her lips curled into an impish grin at the discovery that the demon appeared to be sporting a raging cockstand, the fabric of his pants straining. That discomfort would serve as punishment for his intrusion on both her privacy and peace of mind.

In truth his demand made little difference to her plans, after ridding herself of Namtar, Asmodeus was the very next name on her list of beings marked to meet their end by her sword's blade.

Albeit short, only five names, the list was impressive in content. Each name upon it marking a formidable foe, each one responsible for the fate which had befallen her Cassius. Perhaps once vengeance had been doled out, that heavy sense loss would finally ease, bring an end to four centuries of grieving him.

"I can't guarantee the sword will work against your father. Some claim Asmodeus to have been the embodiment of justice once, and a favored son of the heavens. There's no telling if the sword can make distinction between the creature he was, and what he has become."

“You mean a demon…” Cassius remained motionless, his expression revealing nothing of his own thoughts on the matter.

Wiggling in place she coaxed her leather pants over the humble swell of her ass. “I meant a psychopath.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, underscored by a soft symphony of violins. The setting far too intimate for their current subject of discussion.

She’d been working in the garden, too caught up in tending to her neglected baneberry to notice the rapidly gathering storm clouds until a heavy downpour unleashed its fury, soaking her through. A warm bath had set her to rights, an afternoon of mindless labor being just what she’d needed. She’d not been expecting company, certainly not that of the sin-eater.

It threw her off-kilter seeing him here, within the seclusion of her hide-away home, lounging comfortably amongst her personal belongings, as if her cottage were the most natural place for him to be. As if he belonged here. In retrospect she should’ve known he would come for her, like others, he would’ve heard she had possession of the sword.

The time had come to return home. As much as she wanted to remain here in the mortal realm a little longer, and enjoy the small sense of independence it offered, she simply couldn’t. If the sin-eater had discovered her location, it would only be a matter of time before others would too. The sword could not be risked. She’d already been robbed of her chance at happiness, she wouldn’t squander her chance at vengeance.

“*After we escape, will we be happy in the mortal world?”*

“*We’ll finally be together. You’ll be mine. I’ll be yours. Isn’t that the very definition of happiness?”*

She eased on a navy velvet bustier, ancient protection symbols embroidered into the lining of its fabric. She preferred the freedom of movement her robes provided, enjoyed the feel of smooth silk against bare flesh. Unfortunately, they made her stand out amongst the mortals, and drawing their attention never proved a good thing. Mortals generally feared what they did not understand, and mob mentality often ended badly.

A glance into the cheval mirror revealed his gaze still on her, trailing down until coming to rest upon the lacing she held between her fingers. A challenge. And damn her for being so easily baited, before her brain could catch up to her mouth, the words had been spoken.

“Demon, do make yourself useful and help me lace up.”

With a few large steps he was at her side. His expression pensive as calloused fingers ghosted along the curve of her hip, coaxing her to turn from the mirror until she faced him. The ends of lacing were caught between his fingers, her body heating as she watched his thumb rhythmically rub along the silken length.

“Sin…”

Without warning he pulled them tight, the sudden momentum throwing her off balance as he brought her to his chest. Hells he was tall, the height difference making it necessary for her to look up when glaring at him. Only to find the insufferable demon grinning down at her.

“Have I ever told you that your pride is delectable, priestess?”

She didn’t back away, resolute in her resolve not to be cowed by his antics. Yet that resolve began to falter when discovering his lips to be but a few inches apart from her own. Was he going to kiss her?

“As is your lust, sin-eater.”

The feel of hot breath against her wet lips made rational thought an impossibility. If he dared to kiss her, would she let him?

Everything about the demon drew her to him. Another reason she had placed as much distance between them as physically possible, her desire for the sin-eater at times proving as potent as her love for Cassius. A contradiction which in the past had left her reeling even long after she and the demon parted ways.

His touch eased the tension between her shoulders, her mind calming as she inhaled his warm scent. He smelled of smoke and leather books of the Nessus, while hints of pine and lavender from Normandy lay hidden beneath the citrus notes of his aftershave.

She would not only allow his kiss, but meet it with enthusiasm.

Her lungs seized when heat skimmed along her bottom lip, his tongue stealing away a taste of her. Instinct had her tilting her head up, as if inviting him to feast. She could almost taste sweet bite of honey infused bourbon on her tongue as he turned his head to whisper by her ear.

“You forget who it was that taught you these games Amara. So, stop distracting me and bring me the Sword.” His voice breathless and dark, its cadence evoking imagery of heavy silk.

She barely had time to draw in a breath large enough to spew the outrage she needed to when the pressure in the room bottomed out, the air in her lungs *gone*.

“How little you know my bride if you’re asking her to share her treasures, Demon Prince.”

Namtar.

Cass’s arms closed around her almost painfully… protectively.

“But since we are soon to be wed, I consider her property to be my property.” He stepped into the room, his mirror-masked countenance reflecting the image of Mara’s own stricken face when he turned to her. “As you yourself are my property.”

The singing of metal rang out over the beating of her heart, causing a jolt of panic to sear up her spine, for within the grip of the death god was the sword she had secreted away. Buried beneath the Baneberry bush. Had he been watching her all this time? How was such a thing possible on Gaia? Gwynn’s protection should have barred him entry.

“And as my property, that half-breed mongrel,” he notched his chin towards Cass, “had better be minding where his hands stray, lest he loses them.”

Cass’s hands gripped her waist, giving it a quick squeeze before turning to face down Death.

“That’s *King of the Hells*,” Cassius snarled. “Amara is not your property, she’s already spoken for. Be a good relic and go fade with the rest of your kind.”

She bristled at the thought of these two arguing over ownership of her, had been about to open her mouth and tell them both exactly how much of her they owned, nothing.

Namtar’s laughter cut off her thoughts, the sound grating on every nerve she had.

“Do I look as though I expire for lack of worship, you misbegotten cur?” Namtar spat out, his hooded face tilted toward the sword in his grip.

Before she could draw in a breath to contradict that statement, the sword swung forward.

Cassius grunted, the noise more shock than pain, the sigil on her palm burning as his agony seemed to singe through her. Shock paralyzed her. That never happened before, it shouldn’t be happening. Namtar delightedly pressed the Sword of Divine Justice deeper into Cass’s gut, slowly, watching her for reaction.

She knew to keep the shock and outrage from showing on her face, and was already reaching for her athame, calling up the reserve of infernal

energy she kept stored within its obsidian blade. Darkness rose at her command, tendrils shooting out, pushing Namtar back until he was forced to surrender his grip on both sword and demon to defend himself. Similar to their own powers, the ley-lines had weakened his.

A loud snarl escaped her lips as she stepped in front of the sin-eater, shielding him as he sank onto his knees.

Already Namtar had freed himself from the grip of darkness, rushing her as her fingers closed around the hilt of her sword. Its steel vibrated upon contact, humming as though in anticipation of the cut. This was it.

“Do it,” Cass hissed out, his jerky nod letting her know he understood what she was about to do. This wouldn’t kill him, she berated herself, and this may be the best opportunity she ever got…

She clenched her teeth and ripped the sword out of the demon’s gut, steeling herself against the sound of his agonized moan.

Dark gods, the sound of it—a rush of desire whipped through her, catching her off-guard, and lighting up Cass’s glazed eyes. His pain, her pleasure.

“You can’t be hurting that bad.” She rolled her eyes.

He needed him far away from the death god, she couldn’t risk the demon being used as leverage. Be it sin-eater or Cassius, the demon had never stopped being her strength, and her greatest weakness.

With the jolt of power she’d received from his pain, she managed to gather enough energy to rip open a gateway directly into the Nessus, and without another thought pushed him through. *Be safe.*

Tendrils of darkness sparked, then fizzled as she tried to hold Namtar back, and by some miracle, she was able to do that just long enough to see the gateway close.

“Just you and me now, lover,” she spat that last word. It was time to dispatch him into the fade.

She tightened her grip on the hilt of her sword, needing both hands to raise it, while trying to keep her balance. It wasn’t designed for her, its weight much too heavy for her to handle proficiently, but she would manage. She simply had to.

Namtar’s eyes glowed with malice from behind his mask, meeting hers in challenge.

“You’re being a nuisance, bride.”

“I won’t be made a bride today.” She struck, her words ending on a hiss as the broad blade of the sword rammed into his chest.

Triumph roared through her blood, her heart pounding with… hope?

She shoved harder, feeling the tearing of burial wrappings and sinew as she cracked open his ribs. Her aim had been true, a perfect jab between fourth and fifth intercostals where the blade’s cut was sure to strike his heart. Freedom lay within her grasp.

“Never a bride, and never be loved, how lonely your existence must be.”

His venomous remark served as fuel to her anger, regardless of the fact that his insinuation was *wrong*.

To protect her from his father’s wrath, Cassius had taken their secret to his grave. Amara herself the only one to know that for a few precious moments she had been a bride. She’d vowed herself to Cassius, and he had bound them.

Her fingers were shaking as she held tight to her grip, her stance widening as she pressed her weight into her attack. *Die.* She would enjoy seeing the life drain from those unnatural eyes as his existence was brought to an end.

Unloved? *False.* She had been loved deeply by her demon, and she still loved him fiercely. Neither time nor torment had been able to erase the memory of what his love had felt like. The death god would never be able to comprehend the magnitude of love she’d known in her existence, and how much she grieved the loss of it.

Seconds passed between them, excitement slowly giving way to rising panic when not a drop of blood seeped from the wound.

This has to work....

Bony fingers dug into her face, roughly tilting up her chin, the expression in those eyes not one of defeat but of victory, comprehension turned her breathing shallow.

The sword isn’t working. Why isn’t it working?

Her mother had destroyed her world, Asmodeus had destroyed her heart, and Namtar sought to destroy her soul. Was there to be no justice for her then? Just this once—that’s all she asked.

“You honestly believed the Sword of Divine Justice would come to the aid of a wicked being such as yourself?” His voice was taunting as a pox

marked hand closed over hers. His fingers brushing along white knuckles as she clenched her grip.

“Foolish woman, all you accomplished this day is for me to deny you any leniency I might otherwise have shown you. Your death will be suffering.”

Bone crunched beneath his hold, his unforgiving grip breaking her hand while forcing her to relinquish her hold on the sword.

The tip of his thumb pressed against her bottom lip, roughly wiping away the sin-eater’s lingering taste.

“I now know your weakness, priestess. And when the time comes, I will spare you no mercy.”

“You can’t hurt me Namtar. I survived Hell, and I’ll survive you. And there is no one left for your curse to claim.” To her credit, she sounded much stronger than she felt.

“Ah, my hostile bride, you better than anyone knows that no one is truly beyond my reach. Does the Demon King not have enough enemies who would gladly deliver him into my embrace?” His hand moved to scoop around the back of her neck, preventing her from pulling away. “Does your own mother not plot his demise still?”

“Yes.” That loathsome viper would never quit her ambitions. Protected by status, Amara hadn’t been able to take her mother’s head when reclaiming Asurim from her. Instead, her name was added third on her list.

“You’ll come to regret this, priestess.” He released her and rather than run, she lunged for him, using her undamaged hand to swipe dainty claws at him, nearly taking his mask as Namtar dissipated, taking the sword with him.

“No!” She reached for it, but was too slow, finding nothing but empty space.

Shock and confusion whirled through her as she was left standing alone inside her bedroom. Defeated. Not only had she failed to kill the death god, she’d also lost the Divine Sword of Justice.

“Shit.”

11

RIGHT BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED

HE BLINKED HIS EYES OPEN A CRACK, HIS CONSCIOUSNESS MOMENTARILY lagging. He was laid out on his overly embossed wooden bed, a low burning fire in the hearth providing the only light, the reflection of the flames dancing across the shadows of the canopy above him.

His priestess had shoved him through a portal and stayed to face death alone. A lot of protection he'd been, caught off guard —wounded by the very weapon he'd gone there to collect. What wisps of thoughts he could gather kept floating back to her, hoping she'd made it out of that scrape. He needed her—he'd forgotten to tell her about his father returning.

The wound in his stomach throbbed, blanketing him in waves of pain, his body starved and his power seeking sustenance, his essence barely holding together.

It took him another moment to realize he wasn't alone.

Basileus, his father's Herald, sat beside his bed, his stunning countenance taking in Cass's unclothed body. Basileus shook his platinum hair, the banked fire in his eyes flaring up, setting off the golden glow of his skin. Stunning, yes. Complete dichotomy to his rotten soul.

Bas oversaw his harem, had been around his entire life. He helped tutor the females to Cass's preferences, warmed his bed in between.

"That wound." Basileus leaned forward and Cass flinched back. Something inside of him was shrinking away from the demon's touch, familiar or not. "Was caused by a weapon that could've ended you."

Cass nodded slowly, trying not to stir up the throbbing in his head.

“The Sword of Justice.” His voice was hoarse from disuse. How long had he been out of it?

“You’ll need to feed, young Cassius.” Basileus’s fingertips brushed across his brow, sweeping his hair from his eyes. “You should bathe, and I’ll find you a fitting meal, yes?”

Cass nodded with more assurance than he felt. Hells could he even stand?

With Basileus gone from his room, Cass finally gave in to the agony. His entire body ached and his power was surrounding him instead of residing in him. He couldn’t pull himself back together.

“*Does it hurt terribly?*” A voice floated up from the depths of his mind.

He was delirious. Too weak to keep his thoughts barricaded against invasion. He had no recognition of the voice, the female not one of his varied acquaintance. His mind supplied the name *Assat*, a Sumerian word he would never use for any female. *Wife*.

She felt peaceful and warm, his thoughts safe with her. Was he having a premonition? He’d never before had the ability to prognosticate.

“*Will you feed me your pain?*” Her sweet tones made it feel as though she cared.

Allowing a little madness might be the only thing keeping him sane.

He shook some sense back into his head and eased out of the blankets. Shower, then feed.

He showered cautiously, gingerly cleaning his healing wound—hells, it had barely knitted back together, washing his hair with gentle fingers, trying not to stir up the wasp’s nests that invaded his body. Even turning his head too fast sent shooting pains…

He swiped his towel over the mirror, clearing the condensation enough so he could shave, made quick work of that before wrapping the towel around his waist and making his way back to his bed to collapse. Gently.

His wound still oozed, the edges red and swollen, but healed enough he didn’t bother binding it. He took the towel off and tossed it on the floor, pulling his hands behind his head and laying naked across the covers.

The air was hot and dry against his bare skin, drying him quickly, and he let himself doze as he waited for Basileus to acquire a meal for him.

It wasn’t long before he heard the feminine gasp of approval. And here Cass was laid out like a feast for the woman’s perusal. He looked over to

the doorway where Basileus stood with a lushly curved dark-haired woman. For Basileus's perusal as well, he supposed.

He tried to ignore the sick feeling in his gut. Some buried instinct trying to warn him of *something.* Nothing his rational mind could comprehend. This was the way things were, the way they'd always been. He was the Prince of Lust — he needed to feed off that sin in particular to properly nourish his power. Bas had taught him to use that power, taught him to feed, he had always been there when Cass needed someone; no reason to be wary of him, his mind was just muddled because of his wound.

The woman approached the bed, her dark eyes gleaming. Her fingers tentatively ran over his skin, his cock already stirring to life. She placed her hand on his cheek, turning his head so she could reach his lips, and kissed him softly.

He kept his hands behind his head, using only his mouth to deepen their kiss, his tongue probing, her soft gasps making his cock twitch with readiness. Her hands explored with more assurance, roaming down his neck, her fingernail scraping over a hardened nipple, down and around his stomach wound.

Her lust soaked into him until he was dizzy with it. Again, he wondered just how long he'd been out. How long had he lay here starving?

Her hand grasped his erection and his thoughts scattered, his hands dropped his own head and moved to the back of hers, holding her steady so his mouth could devour hers more thoroughly.

He felt the bed dip as Basileus settled his weight beside them, registering his heat and not much more as the woman broke off their kiss and pressed her open mouth to his throat. Then his shoulder. Her tongue flicking over his nipple as her hand gripped him harder.

His hips moved into her grip, his hand tightened in her hair, urging her down. He needed that hot mouth… right there. Her lips wrapped around him, her tongue circling the head of his cock before she took him in right to the back of her throat.

He groaned roughly, nearly spilling right then, but she pulled back too soon, her tongue going back to teasing.

"She's so very wet," Basileus whispered in his ear, "here. Taste."

He felt Bas's fingers running across his lips and he latched on, running his tongue over the other demon's fingers, groaning at the taste of the

wetness coating them, sucked them into his mouth.

"Will it feel different? When you can finally touch me?" His ghost's voice floated back up as his mind pulled back from what was happening to his body.

"It will." He answered her. "My touch will be unexpected; your breaths will shorten with the anticipation of where my fingers will land next. Or my tongue." His entire body craved her.

"My tongue will taste you everywhere, and I will drink down every drop of your offerings."

"Will I like it?" The ghost's voice had gone breathless.

He nodded once more. "You'll love everything I do to you, Assat-sa. I will make certain."

His thoughts snapped back to the present, the teasing images of another female, another time, manifestations of his weakness—all forgotten when the woman he was with sucked him back down.

He was once again fully engulfed in her hot mouth and Cass sucked harder on Bas's fingers, dying for more of her taste. Then the fingers were gone, and she was moaning, the vibrations surrounding his shaft making his balls tighten with the need to release, then Bas's fingers were back at his mouth. Three of them. Cass took them all.

Hells but he needed...

Her soft hand gripped him at the base, moving up to replace her mouth as her tongue explored around her hand. Bas's fingers left his mouth for a moment, then came back, coated once more, rubbing against his lips—then Bas's mouth met his, his tongue meeting Cass's over his soaking wet fingers, running over his bottom lip, then finding its way inside of Cass's mouth.

Bas's hand held Cass's jaw in place as he kissed him hungrily, his passion raw. Intense. Focused.

Wrong. A growl rose up in Cass's throat, his hand circling Bas's throat, squeezing with a subtle threat.

Bas stopped kissing him and met his gaze, question shining. What *was* going on? All of his instincts were blaring, singling out Bas as a threat—but there was no logic behind it.

Then he felt the sharp edge of teeth dragging down his shaft and his orgasm blasted through him so unexpectedly, he roared with it. His back

arched, and he came. Spurts of it. All swallowed down by her hungry mouth as Bas kissed him deeply, swallowing his groans.

Pride. Envy. He groaned—the lust. The room was thick with it. He was growing dizzy from it—drunk off it.

The dark-haired little temptress sat up on her knees, running the back of her hand under her mouth and licking his taste off her lips. His cock stiffened again.

“Here, princess. Come sit on his mouth and let him devour you.” Basileus’s voice was whisper soft, his hands guiding the female up Cass’s body, carefully avoiding his stomach.

Basileus leaned over Cass, gripping his hair hard. “You’re beautiful when you feed Sin. I could eat you right up.” His teeth nipped at Cass’s lip. “And I think I will.”

Bas kissed the woman as he positioned her thighs over Cass’s shoulders, Cass fixated on the pearls of wetness clinging to her curls, and her throbbing, swollen flesh. With a groan he pulled her down to his mouth, lapping up her need.

He felt her quivering under the ministrations of his tongue. He felt his power merging with his cells once more, his body feeding off the woman’s bleeding lust. Then he registered Bas’s firm calloused grip around his aching shaft.

The demon’s mouth wrapped around his erection, suckling hard, his hand cupping Cass’s sac, shoving it up against his shaft, taking him deeper into his mouth. With a grunt, Cass rocked up his hips, shoving himself in deeper as his tongue plunged into the woman’s waiting sheath. Her wetness ran over his mouth, he pulled more out with his tongue, drinking it down, sucking, brushing against her with his teeth as Bas sucked him off hard and fast.

The dark-haired beauty threw back her head with a throaty cry, her orgasm rippling through her, gushing out, down Cass’s face. She crumpled, her body trembling and quaking as she was shifted to the side with Bas’s sturdy handling.

The blue-eyed demon climbed over Cass, his tongue licking up the juices that had trailed down Cass’s face before meeting Cass’s mouth with his own. Bas’s hand still gripped him hard, stroking rough, and he felt the woman’s tongue back there, softly licking, providing enough moisture for Bas’s hand to move easily.

Cass’s hand went to the back of Bas’s neck, holding him fast, no longer caring about anything but chasing down his orgasm. His hand sought out Bas’s erection, tentatively at first, but with Bas’s deep groan, he gripped harder. He felt a tongue at his balls, then her hot lips sucking at them as Bas gave him a rough tug, and he came.

Fucking fountains of it shot up onto his belly, Bas drinking down his cries and growling into his mouth, then he came too. Cass felt it over his chest, running down the valley between his abs to pool with his own spend, over his healed wound.

Cass lay there, his body absorbing the dark energy wafting off his two bed mates, taking it all in and then taking more.

Each breath had more power infusing him. He wasn’t sure where it was coming from. He wasn’t sure he cared.

His wounds healed, his body strengthened.

Bas blinked up at him, a sly smile playing about his luscious mouth.

“Aren’t you going to welcome me home, my lord?” Bas’s voice was hoarse from his cries.

The sense of unease ate up his insides. His chest was tight with it, his mind trying to grasp onto a thought. *Fear.* It raced through him, with no explanation.

“No.” Cass growled and pushed Basileus off his chest. “I have to...”

Something. He had to do something. He couldn’t be here.

Adrenaline burned through his still-weak body, cold sweat beading at his temples.

“*Don’t you wish that were you, Cassius? He’s helping himself to what’s yours.*” Bas’s voice—he couldn’t place the memory, but it made his stomach churn and stole his breath.

Bas sat back on his heels, looking down at Cass, still semi-erect and completely unashamed. His glowing eyes trailed down Cass’s body, snagging at the puddle on his belly before moving to the female that lay across his thighs.

“Oh my,” Bas said, moving over Cass to lift the woman, “my lord I believe you’ve drained the life right out of her.”

Cass’s stomach sunk farther, nausea turning to bile and pushing up his throat.

He’d killed her?

Very un-demon-like of him, but he preferred not to kill. They were much more useful to him alive.

“Whatever shall we tell her father?” Basileus’s saccharine tone set Cass’s teeth on edge.

He’d known. He knew what shape Cass had been in. Knew he’d need more than a willing female to sate his hunger. He hadn’t held himself in check, he’d let Bas guide him into more.

He was afraid to ask.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he forced out the words he knew Bas was expecting. “Who’s her father?”

“She is,” Bas looked at him, eyes gleaming triumphant, “*was* the daughter of your sister’s Herald, the Arch-Duchess’s second in command. I do wonder if they had plans for her to wed.”

Cass’s chest tightened with the inability to breathe. His half-sister. The one Bas had been off negotiating a treaty with. The female had probably been marked for a political match to further their own standing. Possibly even with himself?

“I suppose this might cause a war. If her body were to be found in your realm.” Basileus ran a hand down her hair, peeking up at Cass from under thick eyelashes.

“What do you want?” Cass’s voice was a rasp, his throat tight. He couldn’t afford to owe the demon anything...

“Why, young Cassius, I want nothing more than to see you fully accept your due.” Bas leaned closer to him, brushing a soft kiss across his mouth.

Cass closed his eyes, exhaling against Bas’s full lips.

“I sit upon the throne. Earned by the right of my own power.”

He had lived in fear of his father’s rage, lived through the pain it had taken to shape him. The Hells belonged to him.

Bas traced his fingertip under Cass’s lip, his eyes heavy with unsated lust.

“Pain and trials made you into what you are,” Bas said, running his fingers over the mess on his stomach, resting on the sigil his father had recently marked him with. Tracing the outline.

“*You’ll remember this, Cassius.”* His father’s voice floated through his mind.

“*Watch carefully, Cass. I’ve been ordered to break one of your bones each time you flinch.”* Bas’s voice echoed back.

The first inkling that he was out of his depth was surfacing. Bas was going to use him to his own advantage, he'd forgotten the simple fact that Basileus was Asmodeus's creature first — whatever relationship he had cultivated with Cass came second to that. He'd been lax in thinking Bas was a friend and could be trusted.

Bas's fingers ran down his jaw, circling the back of his neck, his mouth right at Cass's ear.

"This is what you were born for, Sin. Time to accept it."

Could he afford him as an enemy?

12

NO ONE'S SLAVE

SHE MOVED SWIFTLY DOWN FAMILIAR CORRIDORS, THE SOFT SWISH OF SILK following after every step. The path before her lay illuminated by beams of sunlight spilling down from large, stained glass windows which framed the entirety of the temple. The colorful rays a stark contrast against the black onyx stone from which the temple had been built. The addition of candle lit lanterns gave her surroundings an air of whimsy, as if she were lost within some gothic fairy tale castle.

Only, this was neither fairytale nor castle. This was the ninth temple, housed within the capital of Libiden, Asurim's ninth continent.

This temple represented blood, death, and lust. And to learn of its secrets, one only needed to scent the air, and find the current of dark magick which flowed amongst within the smoke of incense and opium .

"When can we expect your return, Sarratum-sa?"

Her steps faltered at the ridiculous question, she glared over her shoulder at the Kalum priest who struggled to keep pace.

"Do I have a curfew I am not aware of?" She was irritable, having reached the end of her patience some time ago.

As soon as she'd returned to Asurim, her time and attention had been consumed by her duties to the realm. Mercifully, it had left her with little opportunity to dwell on her latest defeat.

Audience had been held from early dawn till long after dusk. She'd met diplomats and emissaries from every corner of the realms, all in the effort to secure prior established alliances. Many of them had come

demanding to be freed of their vow, wishing to disassociate their realm from Asurim and Amara herself after news of Ghata'n's fate began to spread.

Some had gone as far as accusing her of genocide. And perhaps they had a point, her actions had brought on the destruction of an entire civilization, billions of lives ended in less than a day's time. But genocide implied she'd done so intentionally, and it had never been her intention to unleash the Draugr. Hells, she'd not even known herself capable of it, unaware such darkness lay dormant within her.

They'd been wary of her before, now they all feared her, she could sense it. Even her Dominae carried the taint of it upon their essence in her presence. For a while she'd considered telling them the truth. But that wouldn't resolve the issue, they would still fear her. She'd be giving them reason to believe her incapable of controlling her power, she would be exposing a weakness. Her options being what they were, fear was found to be preferable.

Still she'd complied with the demands and requests the ambassadors had come up with. Had done whatever she could think of to help ease the minds of her dominae, ensuring them she was not in fact falling prey to the evils of demonic corruption or wraith madness.

During these last four days she'd played nice, all the while expecting word to arrive from the Nessus regarding the sin-eater's well being. Yet none of her trusted sources had been able to verify his condition. Finally fed up with waiting, she'd decided to go check on him for herself, which is why for the first time in over a hundred years, she was heading for Hell. Or rather, she had been, before being interrupted.

She doubled her pace, forcing the Kalum priest and his cluster of acolytes to catch up.

"A curfew? Of course not Sarratum, but there is concern regarding your intended departure. The order of Kalum has sent me to inform your highness of their insistence that you remain within the Inner Sanctum until…"

The priest's words ended abruptly when her fingers wrapped around his throat.

"The Kalum are but one faction amongst many who consider a high priestess bound in servitude to the realm preferable over one ruling it."

Her voice was coated in ice. “Why would I give their wishes any credence?”

Small claws pressed into his flesh, finding the jugular vein and severing it, then she watched in dispassion as a steady stream of blood soaked the front of his robes. “Let’s be very clear about one thing Kalum, I serve Asurim of my own free will, as its Queen, never its prisoner.”

Her free hand closed around the hilt of her athame bound around her waist, and with a singular thrust, its blade cleaved through the priest’s neck. She waited to see the life fade from the priest’s eyes, wishing those eyes belonged to a Sumerian death god instead, as his body crumpled into a heap upon the stone ground.

“See his body delivered to the order of the Kalum with my regards.”

They had made their opinion known, now so had she.

“Excuse me, Sarratum-sa?”

The sigh she released was one of pure vexation. “What is it?”

Fear radiated from the acolyte who lowered himself before her upon the black stone.

“Praise to you, Sarratum-sa. This humble servant wishes to know what preparations you would have us make for the approaching blood moon ceremony.”

Vexation turned to surprise. “Is the blood moon upon us already?”

With everything that had transpired in recent days, the lunar equinox had simply slipped her mind. A neglectful oversight. With Asurim’s own power depleted thanks to her mother’s negligence, they were forced to rely on infernal energy from demons to feed their magic. Whatever she could barter from the deities she infused back into the realm, those small amounts failing to make any real difference. This meant they couldn’t afford to squander the opportunity to harvest the energy these events generated.

“Nine nights remain before the blood moon, Sarratum-sa.”

There was still time to make it work. “We’ll need sacrifices. Send out orders to have nine fitting tributes selected amongst the prisoners of each dominion. Have them cleaned, well fed and properly prepared. I’ll discuss further details with the Dominae upon my return.”

The acolyte jumped to his feet, eager to make his escape. This caused the unfortunate man to lose his footing as he slipped in the puddle of blood his predecessor had so carelessly left behind. His arms flailing about

comically as he tried to steady himself, before his ass connected with the wet stone floor with a loud thud.

“Highness, I beg your...”

“Shhh!” Her brows furrowing as with a swift motion she silenced the ruckus around her, listening intently. For amidst the surprised screams and shocked outcries, certain she’d caught the distinct sound of a child’s laughter.

It took a few moments before she spotted a small form hiding behind one of the statues lining the corridors. Then let out a curse under her breath. Of all the places for a child to hide, she’d of course discover it behind a detailed depiction of a virgin being introduced to the art of cunnilingus.

“Who thought it a bright idea to bring a child into this place?”

Worshippers weren’t allowed passage into the ninth temple until they were deemed ready to partake in the rites of adolescence, and for good reason. In keeping with the trade agreement with the demonarchy, the ninth temple had been assigned to the worship of the Prince of Lust— the title belonging to Cassius.

The fact that infernal energy was most effectively harvested through the practice of sex and the offering of blood, it made the practices conducted within the ninth temple unfit for young minds. Such things were never to be forced or rushed.

She noted a few of the acolytes already attempting to approach the child. Yet as soon as they did, the creature panicked.

Amara herself lacked any experience with children, but fear she understood. Following instinct she lowered herself what she estimated to be eye level, making an effort to appear less intimidating as she called out, “child, I vow that you’ll not be harmed. Will you please come to me?”

The frightened creature moved out from behind a statue, taking a few tentative steps in her direction. Her subjects offered worship and fear, some might even admire her perhaps. But this small child was honoring her with trust while feeling scared. The realization was humbling.

It was then that a group of men in unfamiliar uniforms rushed into the gallery, heading straight for the small creature. At the sight of them, the child ran, the men giving chase.

“Protect the Sarratum!” The voice of Dominus Oberith boomed through the gallery, Amara quickly finding herself engulfed by guards and

acolytes, they were stifling her.

“Oh for Hells sake I’m fine. Find the child, bring the intruders to me.”

When all moved to obey, it was only Oberith who was left standing by her side. “Dominus, any idea why a child might be hiding out within my temple?”

His expression was thunderous, as she supposed her own must be. “Excellent question, highness. Seems we’re about to discover the answer together.”

It took but a few moments for her guards to successfully round up the intruders, each one brought before them and forced to their knees.

“You are neither worshiper nor acolyte, so by what right do you enter this temple?” Her agitation returned full force upon realizing she’d find herself delayed even further. It had taken her a long time to work up the courage to return to Hell. She had to see him.

“We mean no disrespect to the Sarratum or the holy temple, we were simply charged to retrieve the lost property of the institute.”

Despite her resolve to remain open-minded and fair, she struggled to hold back the anger that surfaced at the unapologetic statement. She sensed fear.

Her Dominus, alarmed by her building ire, spoke carefully, “I assume this child being the property you speak of? If so, I must remind you gentlemen to the fact our Sarratum abolished the practice of slavery nearly a century ago.”

More temple guards returned, this time with General Dravite in the lead, carrying the wildly struggling child slumped over her shoulder. As carefully as she could, her General bowed before Amara before lowering her feisty charge onto the floor, her hand firmly planted upon a small shoulder.

“The institute of Alchemy has broken no laws. I assured you this is no child, but an abomination. A valuable research asset for our alchemists who would see it returned.”

Amara’s eyes scrutinized the small being standing before her, noticing the repressed shivers. And no wonder, its form was rail thin and barely protected from the elements. No shoes, feet brown with dirt, the few items of clothing worn filthy and torn.

But what truly stirred her curiosity most was the bag the child kept pulled over its head. Two holes had been cut out for the eyes, yet

everything else remained hidden beneath the sackcloth.

Her curiosity must've been evident for her general already moved to remove the cloth bag. Yet as she did, a small, grey tinted hand shot out to hold it firmly in place, while a dirty foot barreled out to successfully plant a decent kick against Dravite's shin.

"Feisty creature."

She would've laughed at her General's flustered expression, had it not been for the fear and shame radiating from the child in thick waves. Perhaps it suffered from a physical deformation? Pride and vanity combined with corruption set on by infernal energy often left warlocks cruel.

Amara didn't believe in abominations like most of her kind did, the abominations she knew hid behind faces carved by angels. "An abomination you say? How very intriguing."

"Highness, I implore you to reconsider, it's not a fine sight to behold."

Ignoring the insufferable man, Amara knelt, once again placing herself eye level with the feisty creature, firmly held in place by general Dravite's unrelenting grip. Through the holes cut into the cloth she discovered eyes the color of deep emerald, her second favorite. And within their beautiful depths, beneath the fear and shame, she found a spark of intelligence and curiosity. Not an abomination.

"What is your name, child?"

"Sarratum-sa, please believe me when I say that is not a child."

Oberith's tone turned frosty, her dominus giving first and final warning. "Address her highness without permission one more time, and the guards will be given instructions to take you to the arena to serve as live target practice."

An uncertain voice rose up from beneath the cloth, "my name is Anzillu."

Disgust had her cast a glare at the men, Anzillu was not a name, it was merely the bastardization of the Sumerian word for abomination.

"So your name is abomination? I confess to never have seen a proper abomination before. And I'm afflicted with a terrible case of curiosity. Would you mind showing me?"

Again, those small hands moved, clutching the cloth tightly to secure it in place, the bag moving vigorously as the head within shook to say no.

“No? That’s a real shame. Unfortunately, you must do as I ask, since I am Sarratum—my will is the law. But I’d much rather ask for you to remove the bag than force it from you. So please young one, remove the bag for me?”

His green gaze locked with hers in challenge, and she noted how the ash grey fingers that clutched the cloth so very tightly were in fact trembling. Moments passed between them. Then slowly the fabric was lifted from his head, those beautiful eyes lowering in shame as his face was revealed.

Audible gasps were heard from all around the gallery.

“Impossible!”

“Sacrilege!”

“A monstrosity!”

The chaos around them caused the boy to panic, Dravite’s attention wavered, loosening her grip on the boy, who pulled free and set off into a run.

One of the Institute’s mercenaries then made the mistake of lunging for him, his meaty fist balled to strike down the frightened boy. He combusted into a ball of screeching green fire before he could strike.

“I’ve heard more than enough...” A singular flame danced upon Amara’s open palm as she watched her fire devouring the man.

The gruesome sight of it had many of the acolytes turning their gaze. But not her guards, and not the boy. He appeared to be transfixed by those flames. Slowly his hand reached out to touch the pretty fire, Amara quickly closing her hand over his, guiding it away.

“Child, that is Hexafire, beautiful to watch but lethal to touch, unless you’re the one casting it, do not ever approach its flame.”

As gently as she could she turned the boy away from the sight of the burning body, forcing him to face her. He looked down, her fingers brushed beneath his chin to lift his head up. And while taking in the sight of him, she experienced an emotion she hadn’t felt in centuries. Wonderment.

Tiny horns protruded out from a curly mop of dirty hair, the tips of his ears were pointed. His complexion a fine-grained grey, and while his dirty hands and feet looked grubby, his clean face appeared almost luminescent within the dark hall of the temple. His features a distinctive mixture between warlock and gargoyle, she had never seen his equal.

“Child, why hide away when you are so very beautiful?”

“He is an abomination, a taboo!”

At the accusation the child’s complexion darkened, and again his head lowered in shame. She was about to once again guide it up, when suddenly his head snapped up, then whipped around in the direction the accusation had come from, indignation bright within that gaze.

“I am not taboo, I am beautiful. Sarratum said so, and she is law!”

It had been one of her temple acolytes, the woman’s eyes filling with terror before she too was engulfed by a wave of green flames.

“That is what happens to people who lie to me. I was promised a horrid abomination, and all I got is a scrawny, dirty looking boy in desperate need of a bath and a meal.”

The boy stared at her as if she’d utterly lost her mind. “A boy?”

“Fascinating.” Dominus Oberith had come to kneel beside her, his own expression awestruck as he gazed at the boy. “The offspring of gargoyle and warlock, until now we believed the two races to be incompatible for breeding. This is the first incident of a child being born to a warlock parent in over three centuries. His genetics may very well carry the answer as to why the warlocks have remained barren all this time.”

“And that undoubtedly is the reason why the institute was so keen on his retrieval.” Her brows knitted together in confusion, the child’s story growing more intriguing by the moment.

“This is monumental. Why was this information kept secret?”

“Not many would welcome the idea of having their warlock lineage mixed with that of gargoyles, Sarratum.”

With their realm ravaged by war, the Gargoyles had needed a new home, Amara had needed allies and soldiers to reclaim rule of the realm. As a result, Asurim was now home to both races, but the adjustment had been difficult, and there had been many incidents of animosity between the prideful warlocks and the stubborn gargoyles.

Amara wasn’t an expert with children, but she guessed the boy to be around seven years of age.

“Child, where are your parents?”

A chill of foreboding settled when he didn’t immediately answer.

“No parents.”

With that statement, her mind was made up.

“General Dravite, take the boy to my chambers. See that he is washed, fed, and his injuries seen to by En-Rasputin.”

“But he belongs to the institute!”

She answered through clenched teeth, the stupid man just having sealed the fate of the entire institute.

“Indeed, and the institute belongs to me.”

She turned her gaze back to the child, unable to resist running her fingers through the dirty curls of his hair. To her surprise, rather than rebuke her touch the boy leaned into it, just like her Cassius had so many centuries ago.

“Maleficus. From now on that will be your proper name.”

“Maleficus…” He repeated the name as if to try it for himself, he then gave her a bright smile, showing off his wicked little fangs. “I am Maleficus, and I am beautiful.”

She couldn’t hold back a smile when nodding towards Er-Agate amongst the assembled crowd, who quickly moved in to take charge of their new ward.

“Yes, you’re very beautiful En-Maleficus, but you stink. Come with me, our Sarratum has other things she must see to, and we need to get you washed before you start attracting flies. Then we’ll see about getting you some food, and contact the magick academy to enroll you as their student.”

“I’m going to learn magick? Can I make that pretty fire?”

They waited until the pair disappeared through a corridor before Amara gave a small incline of her head, and Dominus Oberith’s voice broke the silence. “Guards, seize them and take them to the arena.”

She looked on dispassionately as the institute's henchmen were hauled up and escorted away, while a group of acolytes set to work on cleaning up the ashes the fire had left behind.

“Just another day within the ninth temple.”

With a shrug she readjusted the strap of her bag across her shoulders, the soft clinking of vials a reminder to her destination.

“Dominus, purge the institute, bring those responsible for the boy’s mistreatment to the temple and have them prepared. It appears we’ll be well stocked in sacrifices for the upcoming blood moon ceremony.”

She was about to continue for the portal when Oberith’s voice caught up to her. “Sarratum, when you are with the Demon King, do not forget

who he is...”

“Do not concern yourself with such a thing Dominus, in four hundred years, not a moment has gone by in which I was able to forget.”

With that said, she finally made her way towards the Nessus.

13

IT WAS BOREDOM YOU SAW

MEETINGS WERE NOT HIS FORTE. POLITICAL MACHINATIONS HELD NO interest, he never had ambition enough to care to take over the world. In all ways a disappointment to his father.

Still, he'd rather be here. Rather be anywhere than back in his bedroom under Basileus's constant scrutiny. The demon sat at his right, basking in the attention of the Erinyes, the infernal version of angels, females of such debauchery they were never allowed to wander from the hell realms.

His nonchalance was feigned. All his attention was rapt on Basileus and the women. Praying he wouldn't get invited to join in. He'd been unnerved since the incident with the female, waiting for Bas to start making demands.

Not many dared approach him in his father's throne, as broody as he was. Power emanated from him, and he found he had a taste for the looks of fear and cowering.

And the groveling.

Baal, his majordomo and demon of unknown power was addressing him now. "Your father's," Baal was saying, capturing Cass's attention entirely.

He cleared his throat and the demon stumbled over his words. He had a lot of work to do to get this realm firmly within his grasp. They all still bowed to his father. He was treated with respect, but as an extension, not by his own right.

That was going to change.

“I meant yours— my lord.” Baal bowed deep, groveling a bit more. “Your Spark Hunters haven’t turned up a thing. They’ve scoured all layers of the Hells and have moved on to the mortal realm, but there is no trace of the girl.”

Cass intercepted Bas’s knowing look.

Oh. That girl.

“The Lady of the Sixth requires your presence, my lord. To discuss this matter,” Baal continued, oblivious.

Cass’s entire insides tightened. The Lady of the Sixth. His father’s other child. From his true consort. Not a half-bred mongrel like himself. Would she try to contest his right to *their* father’s throne?

Basileus’s hand was suddenly on his shoulder, he tried not to jump. He didn’t like being snuck up on.

“Come now, Cassius. You’ll not let her cow you. You have far more power than she — that’s why your father relegated her to a lower realm,” Bas whispered in his ear, both maintaining eye contact with the majordomo.

Cass just nodded, Bas’s fingers tracing up and down the back of his neck. He stifled the shudder and tapped his fingers on the arm of the throne. Think dammit. He had to get his thoughts in order.

Had to stop feeling like an imposter sitting here.

“If Glasya cares to meet with me, she can visit me here. In this hall.” He kept his voice steady, letting his power leak out to surround him, the darkness comforting. “Do tell her, Baal, that her brother looks forward to her company.”

Basileus’s fingers stilled. The entire room grew quiet.

Were they not aware that they were siblings? Well, half. Perhaps it had been terribly gauche of him to mention.

“Come, my lord,” Basileus’s voice was strong, the underlying tone lacking deference despite his words.

“You should retire and feed. You need to regain your strength yet.”

Cass stood, motioning to a female. He hungered for more. Innocence. Corruption. Something to fill the void that his father’s sigil was sucking at. Yes, he needed to feed— but not from Bas. That just left him feeling… *wrong*.

He wasn’t sure what shifted, but knew he couldn’t fully trust Bas, his loyalty would always be to Asmodeus first, no matter the past they shared.

It was as though reality as he knew it was superimposed over something dark and littered with destruction. Flickering just out of rational thought.

He led the sultry redhead down the hall and into his rooms, watching her firm hips sway as she walked toward his bed.

He closed the door and turned on the female.

“Kneel.” His voice was hoarse, weak with hunger.

The woman slid out of her diaphanous robes, her ruby stained lips turned up into a smirk as she climbed onto the bed, eyes full of mischief. She wanted to play, and he was not in the fucking mood.

“Touch yourself.” He didn’t have the energy to be bothered getting her worked up. His essence seeped out, the exhaustion caused by his father’s leaching of his power causing his normally stringent control to wane.

Lust pervaded the room, the female before him going from playful minx to desperate wanton from one breath to the next. Too easy.

He focused on pulling it back, his revulsion in using his intrinsic power to create simulated desire new but very real. Another reason he would never be more than a disappointment.

He couldn’t stay focused. He was ravenous.

Her dainty finger went into her mouth, she pulled it out slowly, her limpid eyes watching his reaction as she trailed it over each nipple and down to her cleft.

His cock stirred, he wasn’t proud. Starving was starving, and she was an erotic feast.

She let out a mewling cry as she rubbed herself, licking her lips and looking at the bulge in his pants. Which were too tight.

He pulled off his shirt, and stepped out of his pants, walked to the side of the bed and curled his hand around the back of her neck.

“I want you to take it all. Suck me as though your life depended on it.”

His hand tightened slightly around her throat, and for a moment he contemplated… then she sucked him in, her tongue flicking, and his head fell back.

Fuck. Yes.

She sucked him off expertly, cupping his balls, tonguing them, devouring every drop of cum that beaded.

“Will you fuck me now?” she asked sweetly.

His hand tightened at her throat. No. he wouldn’t fuck her. He thrust deeper into her mouth, groaning as she swallowed him down. He wouldn’t

dare take the chance, not when he was overdue for his potion.

She sucked harder, his balls tightening, but he just wasn't getting there.

"Oh, am I interrupting something?" Amara's sweetly acidic tone a warning as she entered his room.

He looked over his shoulder, holding the woman steady with his hand, trying to keep the shock from his expression.

She didn't just show up, though the portal was always open to her. They had a deal, and as such she was one of the few beings he could trust with his life, but she had never freely entered the Hells.

"Come to finish me off?" He asked as she walked in.

He wasn't even sure himself if he was making a sexual innuendo or making light of the fact that her *betrothed* had nearly killed him.

The woman flicked her tongue again, reminding him that his cock was buried in her mouth, that he still needed release.

"Well that's easy enough," Amara whispered in his ear.

Agonizing pain ripped through him as hot candle wax poured down his back, Amara's eyes lit up as she took in the ecstasy on his face.

He shot off in the woman's waiting mouth, coming so hard he stumbled to the side.

"Leave us," he said to her, helping her to her feet as she was still wiping her mouth.

His breathing evened out slowly, his mind still reeling. His Priestess knew secrets he wouldn't even admit to himself.

He and Amara watched the woman leave, then he turned to pull on his shirt and pants.

"I have potions for you." Amara smiled sweetly, venom dripping from her tone.

"Then you're exactly the woman I need to see," he said, slumping into his chaise, then hissing and sitting up at the not-so-gentle reminder that he probably had second degree burns covering his back.

"I know, I know. But better late than never," she said, holding up a glass vial between finger and thumb.

14

POISON ME SWEETLY

“YOU LOOK DIFFERENT, SIN-EATER.”

He turned to her, giving her a sugary sweet smile, hiding the menace he was capable of.

“That tends to happen when one has been gored open by a holy weapon.”

He was trying to bait her, she couldn't exactly blame him.

“As it stands, the fact you are powerful enough to survive the Sword of Justice should work favorably for your reputation. Put a little fear in your minions?”

He sprawled out along the length of the worn velvet chaise, his gaze growing distant.

“You pushed me through a portal and gave no thought to my death. I could have died.”

Her shoulders were too tense to shrug with the carelessness she wished to convey, so she settled for rolling her eyes. No thought to his death? Ignorant demon, his death had been haunting her for centuries. It was the reason why she had pushed him through that portal, an instinctual need to save him.

“I had an opportunity to end him,” she whispered, in case her voice decided to crack. “Though the effort proved futile, the sword is a hoax.”

His greedy eyes wouldn’t stop analyzing her expression. Dark gods, she prayed she could brazen this out.

“What’s your next move then?” he asked, shifting into his seat.

“Haven’t thought that far yet.” Of course she had. She just kept coming up empty, no more moves available on the game board.

The demon looked… restless. She noted the circles under his eyes, and well recognized the haunted expression within their dark depths. Immediately knew who was responsible for it.

Basileus, the Prince of Pleasures had subjected *her* Cassius to countless horrors in the past. His gaze held that same expression each time Basileus had touched him, or had forced him to visit the harem.

Her Cassius was dead, and the sin-eater who took his place had been made to forget the atrocities the Prince of Pleasures was capable of. In the beginning of their collaboration she had tried to warn him, yet each time he had been quick to defend his friend and lover.

Telling him the truth was a risk she couldn’t afford, his damaged mind capable of processing only so much before breaking. Instead she had her spies and mercenaries installed within the Nessus to be her eyes and ears, guarding the sin-eater from the shadows for the better part of a century.

“You aren’t going to tell me?” He sat up, eyes pinning her to the spot. He knew her too well. “Do you think I would betray you?”

She could still feel his stare on her as she retrieved the bag she had dropped in the corner of the room when she had walked in on Cassius giving the female an adult throat swab.

“We made a deal you and I, a binding contract.” Her voice wavered as she skirted the absolute truth, “an unbreakable one.” To her kind it was a sacred pact, entered usually between life partners so they would not fear betrayal from each other. Between them, it had been business.

“Why did you come?” His dark eyes blazed, the glow from the hearth adding flashes of gold to their rich amber coloring, a cruel trick of the light making them appear to burn from within. With a fire extinguished long ago.

Not her Cassius.

She averted her gaze, busying herself rummaging through the contents of her backpack, pulling out a few vials then shaking them lightly.

“You brought the contraceptive?”

“I did.”

When Cass had first requested poisons that would kill his ability to procreate, she had thought some part of him remembered the promises

he'd made to her in the dark so long ago. In reality it came down to him not wanting to give his father anything. Including a succession.

She looked up and he was standing right there.

"What are you doing?" With a silent gasp she backed up a step, the brightness shining in his eyes a little too close to madness. A little too reminiscent of his father's.

He took a step closer, advancing on her still.

He kept moving in on her forcing her to step back until she hit the wall.

"You know my secrets," another step, "I can trust you."

He trapped her against his body, his soft whispers seducing her mind while his body set hers on fire.

"And you could never betray me."

His expression was dark, the set to his jaw telling her he had firmly decided on something.

"What if I don't take it this time Amara." His hand closed over hers, the one that contained the poison that would render him temporarily infertile. "What if instead I decide to take you and have you carry my heir."

A family? Do you think you'd ever want children, Cass?

Only if they have your eyes, amata.

That singular stab of pain shot through her, seizing deep inside her chest. A dead heart which never seemed to stop breaking.

A different life, a different girl, a different demon.

He grabbed her chin and brushed his thumb across her bottom lip. His eyes growing heavy as they raked over every inch of her. His words and gaze unsettling, leaving her to feel… exposed.

"Just Imagine the power, having you for a mother, with my bloodline. No one would be able to oppose us," he bent in close, breathing words against her lips, "not even my sister."

Only few other combinations of words in existence would prove more effective in snapping her out of his enthrallment. Anger flared through her, and before she could catch herself, her hand struck out, her palm leaving an angry red imprint on his cheek. He wanted a child from her for his own political machinations. Her pride stung, and somehow her shattered heart continued to hurt.

"I am no one's broodmare, demon."

He stared at her for a moment, his eyes blazing fury, and by some trick of the light she could almost see the hell-flames spark within those dark depths. Perhaps the corruption of the Nessus had taken root and he was going mad like his father?

“You reject my offer, yet you happily give yourself to the Huntsman?” His expression turned cold, betrayal flashing through his eyes.

She moved to strike again, but he grabbed her wrist. “Don’t push me any further.”

The struggle left her. Gwynn, the Huntsman and King of the Dark Fae had been the one to keep Namtar at bay when she had been near defenseless against the death god. For all these years while she’d been protected by a wielder of Wild Magic, Namtar had mostly kept his distance, only to resurface the moment she’d gone after that thrice-damned sword.

Gwynn had been the one to teach her about her own power. She owed him much. At times, she’d pondered on how pleasant their lives could’ve been if she had been his destined one, the one with the power to break the Wild Hunt’s curse. And had she been capable of loving anyone, she believed she would’ve loved the Dark Fae. But her love had been drained dry.

“It wasn’t meant as an insult.” His voice was back to being silken seduction, his hold on her easing, but he hadn’t let go. “We would suit. We work well together.”

Her fingers moved to stroke along his cheek, easing the sting. “You don’t want me, Sin. You need me… and the day will come when you discover that is simply not enough.”

Anger crossed his face, turning it dark and cold as he pressed deeper against her, hissing into her ear.

“You think too highly of yourself Priestess, I don't need anyone. I’ve never had anyone, and I’ve made it this far.”

Never…? Her thoughts sputtered. *The demon had some nerve.*

The rational part of her mind interjected, reminding her he didn’t have those memories. Asmodeus had made certain nothing of his past, of *her* demon remained.

“I don’t need a female’s affection. All I need is a good fuck now and again.” The words were callous, even for the sin-eater.

She bristled, then shoved at him with all her strength, a pulse of her power radiating outward, shoving him back and away from her, releasing her for her feet to find purchase once more on the carpeted ground.

“Oh, you don’t need me?” She wouldn’t even admit to herself how deep his careless words had cut. “How quickly the demon forgets who helped him secure the throne he now sits on.”

She lifted her chin and made a beeline for her bag.

“I’ll just get my potions, close up your shrine at the ninth temple and get the fuck out of your way. It’s been real Prince of Lust, and good luck to you.”

“Amara wait...”

He moved to follow her only to sway on his feet, his hand blindly grasping for the wall.

“Fuck Priestess, exactly how much power did you hit me with?”

Concern shot through her, squabble instantly forgotten. “Nothing you shouldn’t be able to handle…”

Had she been too late with his potions?

She pressed him back into the chaise, feeling his forehead, waving her hand at the side of his face, just to test. He bore injures from his childhood that never had nor ever would heal properly, leaving his vision permanently impaired on his right side.

Blood trickled ominously from his nose, covering his lips and chin—and from his ear—cutting a trail across one perfect cheekbone.

“*Get the blood off.” She pulled off her shirt and frantically pushed it through the bars. “Get it OFF HIM.”*

Aza turned his face from her nudity, pulling off his own shirt instead, gently dabbing up the mess of Cass’s face.

“*Cass?” Aza whispered, she could barely hear it over her own shuddering breaths.*

“*Fuck. Curse and rot his hide,” Aza was still muttering, his hand waving at the side of Cass’s face opposite of where he was bleeding.*

Her brows knit with confusion. Her stomach knitting when Aza looked back to her with such a look of devastation she thought the world might end right then.

“*Amara, I need to bring him to a healer. I promise you he’ll live, alright?”*

“What’s wrong with him?” Her lip trembled, her eyes burned, but her anger was building. “Can’t you bring a healer here? He came to see me, he wanted me.”

She shook off the raw memory, wishing she could forget, like the demon had forgotten; he wasn’t even aware, and she couldn’t explain to him without the risk of damaging his mind any further. Their past needed to remain buried within the ruins of his father’s destruction.

Instead she had fed his addiction to her poisons. It had been tragically simple really — he craved pain, he needed medicine, she provided both. There had been a delivery two weeks ago—surely, he hadn’t gone that long since his last dosage?

“Since you’re too stubborn to tell me what’s truly going on with you, I’ll just go ahead and find out for myself shall I?”

He groaned as she shredded his shirt with dainty claws, her hands hesitating at baring chest, this was a line she’d promised herself not to cross, for the sake of preserving her own sanity she didn’t want to see her sigil above his heart. Yet something was terribly out of sorts with the sin-eater, something he was keeping from her.

It wasn’t only her mark she found on his chest, her breath hissed out in recognition of the sigil burned into his flesh above the sword scar.

“Asmodeus. He’s back… how is this even possible?”

His strong fingers closed around her wrist, his large hand engulfing it, his eyes pleading with her.

“Mara, I…need help.”

She moved her hands to cup his cheeks, pulling his face up to hers. “Dark Gods demon, I don't understand. How did he do this to you when he’s been banished?”

“I need…” his voice trailed off, his teeth scraping lightly across his plump lower lip, as though he were keeping his next words prisoner.

She fell onto the chaise beside him, pretending he hadn’t been just about to ask for something she could never offer, her thoughts racing with the repercussions of his father returning. They had to ensure there would never be *any* possibility of that happening.

She tugged his shirt off his shoulders and dropped it unceremoniously to the floor, her eyes riveted on Asmodeus’s seal, her hand drawn to the singed edges.

“You going to touch me?” His head rested along the back of the chaise, his heavy lidded eyes following her hand. “That’ll be new.”

Her gaze jumped to his. “Be quiet, brat.”

More than a hundred years they’d spent on opposite sides of those iron bars, longing for an opportunity such as this. The demon wouldn’t understand just how momentous a simple touch could be. How could he?

Not her demon. A different life.

Her hand rested over the bare skin of his chest, his muscles tensing under her light touch. Maybe if she siphoned some of that pain...

“Fuck. Mara.” He grabbed her wrist and pulled her over his lap, his breaths sawing hard.

“Don’t feed more power into it. He’s getting it all—no telling what he can do with it.”

Had he felt the surge of energy between them? It had nothing to do with her magic, she’d kept it reined in. She opened her mouth to tell him so, then closed it when realizing she wouldn’t have any other explanation to offer him. The truth of their past something never to be revealed.

“I have to touch you, to reverse what he’s done here,” she frowned, cutting her gaze away from his. “His won’t be a binding sigil, unless you agreed to it. Even so, mine was there first.”

He smiled brightly. “You called dibs?”

“Dammit, demon. Be serious.” *She sure as hell had*.

“I didn’t agree to this.” His hand waved over his chest.

“I don’t even know what he’s done, just that it’s making me hunger — my appetite…” He swallowed hard and slumped back into the cushions, releasing her completely. “You shouldn’t touch me.”

She put her hand to his cheek, angling his face up to hers. “Sin. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. We’ll fix this, you take your potions, and get back to ruling—like you ought to have been doing in these past five years.”

He gave a mute nod and lifted her hand back to his chest.

“Put me back together again Mara.”

Her chest tightened at his careless words, and it took her a moment to shake them off. *Concentrate*. Nearly as bad as Asmodeus returning would be him having open access to the sin-eater, utilizing him as a puppet as he’d long intended, with Bas steering both his feeding preferences and his rule.

She tapped into their bond. It was always there between them, dormant yet underlying their every interaction, feeling it flare up was… *exquisite*. Sin's eyes lit up as he gasped, pressing her hand tighter to his chest, his hips shifting under her, his erection hard as iron.

Rooting out the essence that didn't belong, she peeled it back from his, like removing a leech from healthy flesh. Cass's body shuddered beneath her, her concentration wavering at the feel of him. Leave it to the demon to turn this sexual.

By the time she had removed every hook, every grasping sucker, her hands were trembling and her skin was dampened with sweat. Without a word he pulled her head down to his chest and held her there, both of them breathing hard, her lacking the energy and will to fight him.

"It's gone?" he asked when his heart finally resumed a normal rhythm.

She nodded and straightened up, moving out of his grasp and off his lap. No blurring lines. *Not her demon*. Rising on unsteady feet, she went over to collect his potions from the floor where they lay abandoned.

"Now aren't you glad I came to deliver these personally?" She held up the crystal vial between thumb and forefinger, waving it in front of him.

"Yeah." His brows furrowed and he sat up slowly. "Why did you?"

She shook her head and remained silent, sorting through her bag for the other potion he needed. Silence stretched.

"Glasya is coming for me," he said, halting as though pondering his words carefully. "Since you're here and in a helpful mood."

She went still, hand tightening around the vial. That name—affected her, sent a tidal wave of anger through her and she couldn't let him see any of it.

"What did you do to incur the wrath of the Archduchess?" Her tone was snide. She refused to feign respect for the female, even she had her limits.

"I killed her Herald's daughter," he whispered, closing his eyes and turning his face from her.

"Bas… arranged for her to see to me—after I was injured by the sword. I just… kept feeding."

The cut crystal of the vial dug an imprint into her hand. How like the Prince of Pleasures to turn the sin-eater's need to feed against him.

"So, she's dead." She'd killed millions, he'd killed one.

Surely they could fix this. Manipulation was not a new concept for Basileus, he and Asmodeus had been playing these games with Cassius since he was a child. Killing pets and friends, ostracizing him to control his son's actions, while placing the blame for their demise on him. This was simply the retelling of an old tale.

She perched beside him on the chaise, her fingers pushing the hair back from his face before she could think to stop herself.

"He used your very nature against you. Of course he would."

Asmodeus's branding him made much more sense now; driving the sin-eater mad with hunger, unleashing him as the Prince of Pleasures saw fit.

"Undoubtedly, he has positioned you exactly where he wants you—so tell me, demon—where are you?"

His eyes flew up to hers, the brown so dark they were nearly black. His hunger overtaking his rationality.

"I can't figure that out." He grabbed up her hand with the vial. "Help me forget, just for now."

"Sin, running away is the equivalent of letting them win." She pulled her hand back, withholding his oblivion.

"Think. Is he allied with your sister? We both know they would stop at nothing to see your father back on the throne. Basileus is your father's herald—linked to him. If Glasya's," she barely stifled the shudder at the mention of that name, "Herald demands retribution, she can challenge your right to rule."

He blew out a long breath, sinking back into the cushions, his hand swiping down his face.

"They've maneuvered me right to where they want me to be, with my back into a corner." He looked up at her, expression one of devastation. "I can't undo what was done."

She smiled coldly. "You? Yes, you can't do a thing. They made sure of that," she cupped his cheek in her palm, "but it's okay demon, because I've decided to help you."

He offered her a cheeky grin, the sparkle back in his eyes. "A boon for old time's sake?"

She snorted delicately. "Demon, we owe each other nothing."

He looked down, tracing the outline of the sigil on her palm, her entire body warming to the intimate touch, their connection still wide open, with

no way for her to shut it down until he fed and got his own power back under control.

Dark gods, she knew he wasn't hers, but her body remained at odds with her rationalizations. Every touch or caress the demon spared her leaving her craving more.

"Mara, I can never pay you back for all you've done for me." His hand reached up so quick, from one blink to the next he had her chin in his grasp. "And no matter how you resist—I say this makes us friends."

15

POINTS WERE MADE

"ALL RIGHT, LET'S BEGIN SHALL WE." AMARA COULD HEAR THE brittleness within her own laugh. Her pulse erratic, even as she tried to tamp down the thrill his words caused.

Friends. Dark gods—how was she supposed to manage such a development?

He cast her a grin as she approached, and it only took her a moment to realize why. His position upon the chaise made it impossible to reach him unless she were to stand between those long, stretched out legs. The demon was deceptively lean, his height made him appear almost slender, until one was ensconced in his limbs and realized just how large he was.

He didn't move or adjust, even after she pinned him with a glare. And when she finally acquiesced, that lazy grin of his widened into a true smile. *Dark Gods that smile.*

"I don't deserve you."

One hand pressed the edge of the small vial against his mouth, the other easing his head back.

"You're correct. You don't."

Without hesitation his lips parted, drinking down the dark liquid she offered.

They had bound themselves irrevocably, Amara could never betray him, he could never deceive her. Even so, she found the level of trust he placed in her humbling. The sin-eater had seen the terrible magics she was

capable of, yet never questioned her methods. He never judged or feared her. Stranger still, he had decided he wanted her for a friend.

She had long ago vowed to herself to always protect him. First out of loyalty to her Cassius, secondly out of necessity, to keep Asmodeus from the throne of the Nessus.

But friendship went far beyond protection. It meant she would need to step out of the shadows and become actively involved in his life.

Still, it could be the opportunity she needed to break the demon free from Basileus's influence. For three hundred years the prince mentored and reshaped him in the image of his father. Without memory to guide him, the sin-eater had accepted the Prince of Pleasures as friend, lover, and advisor. For the past century, she'd been forced to hear the demon speaking fondly of his lover, biting her tongue in order to spare the sin-eater's fragile mind.

Darkness stirred within, calling for vengeance, tempered only by the need for patience. Murdering a prince of the demonarchy would jeopardize everything they had worked towards. She had to do something to ease the grip Basileus held on him, starting with the harem.

It would do no good to be jealous over the Prince of Lust

He no longer belonged to her.

Already the demon's eyelids were growing heavy, breathing uneven. A flush of heat spread across his bare chest, a sight not even she was immune to. Instinct was overtaking sense.

Basileus's plan had likely been to have the sin-eater grow fearful of feeding from any other than him. Leaving him to meet with the Archduchess in a weakened condition. Easy prey to dominate and control.

Not while I'm around.

The slow release of the poison was going to cause him pain. That pain would help silence his mind, take away inhibitions, and allow instinct to take over to do what it must—*feed*.

Strong fingers splayed over her hips, his touch snapping her out of her thoughts while coaxing her closer. His hold was gentle, knowing she would eventually resist, she always did. This time she surprised them both, she swayed into his touch, and relented to his pull. Their bond was still wide open, the impulse to join with him a magnetic compulsion, impossible to ignore.

Energy charged the air between them as she eased against him, her legs parting to straddle his lap. His fingers dug in as his hands clenched tighter, making escape impossible, then he pulled her closer, his expression daring her to try to move away.

One of his hands wandered up to the middle of her back, pressing her forward with his fingertips, testing, pushing until their chests touched. Both their breaths were suspended, she could feel his heart hammering through his ribcage, echoing off her breast. His soft groan snapped her out of her haze and she remembered the need for air, nearly choking on it when he shifted beneath her.

“Is this going to hurt?” His voice went husky.

“Yes.”

Rational thoughts were difficult with all of her focus centered on those sensual lips and the feel of his erection pressed against her.

“The time release of this poison is slower than your usual dosage. I need you coherent for a little while longer demon. Stay with me?”

His fingers tangled into the length of her braid, his dark gaze transfixed upon the strands as he freed them from their bind only to watch them slowly rain back to her shoulder.

Her sigil upon his chest seemed to call for her touch. His breathing turned shallow, his body arching into hers as she trailed the outline with the tip of her finger. The intimacy of the caress unsettled her, it felt too natural, too raw. Yet somehow, she couldn't seem to bring herself to pull back.

“What are you planning?”

She shrugged. “I’m going to help you correct a few things around here, so you won't have to do it alone.”

Another breathy moan, the light sheen of sweat coating his forehead and chest evidence that the poison had entered his bloodstream. As it ran its course, it would continue to heat his blood until it flowed like liquid fire through his body.

“Touch me Mara.”

Unlike alcohol which served to dull one’s wit and senses, poison helped ignite them. In surrendering to pain, awareness became distilled to nothing but sensation and need.

“I want to feel...”

A guttural groan was her only warning before his hand moved to cup her breast, his touch finding a beaded nipple hidden away behind the silk of her robe. He undulated beneath her, her head falling back as she arched into him, rocking against the delectable pressure of his straining shaft. Leather rubbing against silk, hard flesh pressing against soft heat.

Dark Gods, but what she would give to be able to have him… just once.

His eyes shone with a feverish glint as he looked up at her, his heated gaze reflecting her own thoughts back to her.

“Let me have you Mara, we can figure it out later.”

She grinned down at him, while sternly reminding herself of all the reasons why giving in would be the wrong thing to do. “Sin-eater, one taste of me and you’d fall hopelessly in love. Then where would we be?”

His tongue flicked out, running along his bottom lip, his dark eyes on her.

“My bed… for starters.”

Her nipple grew taut beneath his circling thumb, her mind fixating on images of his mouth closing around that peak to ease the ache. Heat and friction leading her into a slow madness, she could feel herself falling into her own trap as her hips found that ancient rhythm, rising and falling together.

“Fuck!”

His cry echoed through the room, his power taking control, unrestrained and starved, demanding to be fed. The call of lust permeated the air, and she knew what... *who* would answer.

Her lips turned into a bitter smile, pressed against the demon to whisper by his ear, “three, two, one…”

“My Lord are you alright?”

Basileus’s eyes widened in surprise at the sight of her before flooding with unconcealed loathing. The feeling was mutual. What made her stomach turn in revolt was not his arrival, but the sight of those same eyes growing hooded as they lingered on the sin-eater.

The demon's cheeks and chest were flushed, lips swollen as though he’d been thoroughly kissed—his eyes heavy-lidded and gleaming black. He looked as though he were close to the ecstasy of pleasure rather than agony of pain.

Her own hair was disheveled, the fold of her robes concealing their hips, her hand pressed over his chest to hide her sigil that he normally hid under glamour. For all intents and purposes, it looked as if the demon king were already feeding—from her.

She knew the precise moment Basileus reached that conclusion, for his expression went glacial.

“Priestess Amara, you’ve returned to the Nessus. I must say, I’m surprised.” His tone was mocking, heavy on the subtext.

She felt the subtle shiver run through Cassius as he became aware of Basileus’s presence. It had been a minuscule tell, wouldn’t have been noticeable to any who weren't literally sitting atop of him. But she had noticed, and it confirmed the power the Prince of Pleasures held over him.

The Prince stepped into the library which served as the sin-eater's private bed chamber as though he ruled the ground he walked on. As though he was assured of his welcome and place. And it didn't escape her notice how he purposefully came around the right side, utilizing the demon's impaired vision to his advantage. Cassius flinched, and her hand moved to cup his cheek, while the other soothed by brushing her fingers through his hair.

Could he possibly remember some of what was done to him?

The demon had been forced to lose his mind, and been stripped of his soul — something one could not come back from. As much has she grieved the loss of *her* Cassius, she was grateful he’d forgotten the horrors he had suffered. Even if it meant he had forgotten her as well.

Perhaps she couldn’t kill a Prince of Hell without creating a conflict between their realms. *But I sure as shit can force him back in his place*.

“Are you surprised En-Basileus? You really shouldn't be. I came here to demand an answer as to why the power of the Nessus appeared to be waning, only to find its king starved.

“The supply of infernal energy promised to Asurim is lacking. And as master of the harem I hold you responsible for this. Seems to me you’ve been serving your king poorly.”

A soft groan was the only response from the demon whose lap she occupied. His grip released her breast, only to wrap his arm around her waist, clinging to her. It was all the encouragement she needed.

“In light of the situation I see no other choice than to install some of my own warlocks into the King's harem to ensure his well being. Have

word sent to the Ninth Temple that I have need of three master warlocks presented here for worship.”

The anger in his expression caused her lips to curl into a malevolent smile. He looked as if he wanted nothing more than to strangle her. Like good old times.

“You have no authority here Priestess Amara, and you know how dangerous the Nessus can be to your kind. You and yours best stay to your own realm, we wouldn’t wish to see anyone get hurt.”

She was about to answer him with her own cutting retort, when her breath faltered. Instead of attacking the Demon Prince like she intended, her back arched and her eyes drooped as a warm hand slipped between the folds of her robes.

“I'm not done with her...” Cass said on a hushed breath.

Cassius's own lusty groan was underscored by an angered growl coming from Basileus.

“My lord, please allow me to serve you. No need to degrade yourself in this manner.”

His hands kept moving up and down her thighs as if to memorize the curve and texture. His lips were gentle in contrast as he reverently rained kisses down her throat, before burying his head in the crook of her neck.

“Mara. Don’t leave.” His voice a mere whisper in her ear.

She opened her eyes to stare into that feverish dark gaze, her own voice grown thick with emotion she didn't recognize.

“I am not going anywhere, demon.”

Despite her resolution to keep her wits about and to play the game, she could feel herself succumbing to his caress. Her heartbeat became erratic, her breaths falling in short and uneven spurts, each rocking thrust causing heat to spread through her belly to pool wetly between her thighs.

Already she ached, an empty sensation which made her yearn for the feel of his fingers on her, inside of her, readying her for him.

“Demon, please...” She meant to say *stop*, but that word turned to ash upon her tongue.

“I've fantasized about touching you, never imagined you’d be this responsive."

“My lord, I must object to this, the harem is my domain and the warlocks have no place in it. Use their kind to serve us, to worship us, but don't defile yourself with them.”

Filth. That hadn't stopped him.

The shudder of revulsion jolted down her spine before she had a chance to harden herself. And beneath her, the demon froze, awareness flaring through his heated gaze.

Cass's eyes glinted dangerously. "Are you going to defile me priestess?" His voice lowered into a rasp that sent an aching shudder through her core, "shall I degrade myself by doing filthy things to this delectable body?"

His words were accentuated by his hands sweeping up her legs, thumbs dragging up inner thighs. Squeezing her legs against them doing nothing but intensify the throbbing inside of her.

"Cassius. She is a *warlock*," Basileus spat out the word, rage plain on his smarmy tongue.

Cass's hands stilled, the charge in the air altered, becoming something darker, and infinitely more dangerous.

"Do as she has commanded, Bas. And leave us — before I do something to you we'll both regret." His voice was even and full of ill-concealed malice.

Desire soured in her belly, turning over when she picked up the imprint of Basileus's own lust entwined within his rage and resentment.

"As you wish, my king."

And as the Prince of Pleasures finally turned to leave, it was with the unspoken understanding this would not be the last of it.

"Demon…"

She wasn't sure what she'd been about to say, whatever had been on her mind vanished as soon as his lips crushed hers. The nausea within her eased by his touch, the cold encasing her insides banished by his embrace, the horrors of the past silenced by his lips. And all she wanted in that moment was to surrender to that kiss, to lose herself in it.

Instead, she bit him.

"What the hells!"

His head snapped back from her, his expression one of confusion and shock. Then a flash of excitement flared within feverish eyes at the taste of his own blood upon his lip.

"Incorrigible kinkster."

Her thumb brushed away the beading crimson.

"Me? You're the one that bit me!"

He held her firmly in place, moving close enough for his lips to brush against her own as he spoke.

“Why’d you bite me?”

Her fingers caressed the hard set of his jaw until she felt him relax once more.

“To remind you that even loyal dogs will bite if not kept firmly in hand. You’re the master, not the dog, don't ever let him dominate you. He is not in control of you, neither him or your father own you. You gave them that power.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but no sound came. Instead, his muscles seized, his entire body arching up. Finally, he let out an agonized groan from between clenched teeth.

“Sin?”

He bucked up, robbing her of breath and sanity as he ground himself into her.

“I’m starved. I held on… tried… won’t be able to hold back much longer...”

“Oh hells.” She stared in fascination as his gaze flooded from darkest brown to deepest black, his body growing hot and feverish beneath her touch.

“It’s the poison at work. This is where the real fun starts for you, demon.”

With a swift motion she moved off his lap, pushing aside clumsy fingers as he fumbled with the closure of his pants, helping to ease the leather down long and muscular legs. His cock was indecently large, arched up perfectly towards his navel, his hand wrapping around it as soon as it was freed from the confines of the tight leather.

Once bared, she let her eyes wander over the perfection of his body.

He was the embodiment of sin, everyone's wicked desire made flesh. An ambitious design, and a difficult burden to carry. Long ago she’d been foolish enough to believe him made for her alone, that she could keep and cherish him. That dream had been the first one stolen.

It’s not him… my demon is dead.

“Put your lips on me, let me fuck your mouth. Let me have you!”

She placed a chaste kiss against the thunderous beat of his heart, right below her sigil.

“Such a romantic you are.”

That moment of mindless madness, that stolen moment of shared recklessness had shattered. Sense and reality ruled once more, causing her to step away from him.

“It can never be me, Sin.”

Without a soul he was safe from Namtar's curse. He didn't love her now, nor would he ever. But the Death God wouldn’t spare the demon should he discover what he’d once been to her. He wanted leverage, and would have it if he ever learned how much the demon still meant to her.

Still? Dark gods she was a glutton for punishment.

“You are a pain in the ass at times demon, but I'm not risking you.”

A soft knock on the door preceded the entrance of three exquisite warlocks. Ignoring the idiotic pang of jealousy that tried to rise within her, Amara beckoned them forward.

“His mind is afflicted by poison and his body weakened by hunger. You’ll serve him, feed him with your lust, care for him with your own bodies. You’ll see him regenerated and empowered. In three days, you return to Asurim, and will never speak of what transpired within this room. Are we understood?”

Three days was all she could risk, lest the corruption of the Nessus began to affect their minds. She would need to work out a rotation between the temple and the harem to see to his needs and her warlocks’ safety.

All three bowed low, her orders beyond questioning. Not that they would—she could already sense their excitement, their anticipation evident as they set to assist each other in a show of disrobing.

At the sight of their exposed flesh, Cassius moved, his arms spreading in welcome as the two females and the male moved to join him. He was safe for now, would be well looked after. Which meant it was time for her to leave.

She reached for her discarded bag, a hard pull had her reeling back, turning in place to come face to… chest… with a very disgruntled, and very *naked* sin-eater. Again she tried to step back, her retreat halted by his too-tight grip around her wrist.

“Sin, I can’t be part of this...”

His fingers dug into her flesh, a wordless command for her to stay, to which she lifted her brows at him.

“You do remember what happened last time you decided to go caveman.”

She had expected the heat and excitement in his gaze, but not the spark of stubbornness. The poison had left his brain muddled, but it had done absolutely nothing for his obstinacy.

“You stay, or they go and I starve.”

He would too, of this she had no doubt. One trait the sin-eater and her demon shared was that rational thought always flew straight out the window when the mind was set on something.

Unfair as it was, this meant that if Glasya managed to gain the upper hand on him while he was too weakened to deal with her, she would be partially responsible. Because she could have stayed.

Perhaps she was using logic to twist her desire into rationality. Because the selfish, prideful, and foolish side of her wanted to stay, wanted him to want her.

“Stay…”

His voice sounded like a plea, effectively eradicating what little remained of her resolve.

She didn’t answer him, instead her hand closed over his before pulling him along towards his bed. He followed.

Rather than lay down upon the massive poster bed, she pressed herself up against the heavily carved headboard, guiding him to come sit between her legs. Without hesitation he lay back against her, his head coming to rest upon her shoulder as she pressed a kiss against his forehead.

“You’re incorrigible, demon.”

She was rewarded with a smile that made his dark eyes spark, and for a moment she could almost imagine it was ember fire within.

“And you’re delectable, priestess.”

She reached for his wrists, moving his arms behind him, his hands against her waist.

“As long as your hands remain here, I’ll stay.”

He sighed in anticipation when she nodded at the three waiting warlocks, giving them permission to approach.

Fingers clenched her sides, his heated breath on her neck as his lips and tongue lapped against her throat.

“More...” he rasped out. His hold on her eased, his back bowing when the lithe blonde warlock woman closed her sultry mouth around his engorged crown.

The second female sat on her hands and knees before them. And only at Amara's nod did she approach to hungrily claim the sin-eater's mouth in a deep kiss. Finally, the third, an exceptionally well-built male joined. His gaze riveted on her and the demon in her arms, as he moved to stand behind the female kissing the demon.

Her teeth caught her bottom lip as she watched him spread the female's thighs further apart, before slowly sinking his hard cock deep inside her.

The woman moaned, and Cassius purred as he pulled Mara's bottom lip free, before sinking his own teeth into that plump flesh.

She was dizzy with wanting him, the blurred lines easing as she felt their bond connection fading to the background, as it should be. As it had to remain. She broke off their kiss, looking into his eyes, committing his look to memory, along with all the other looks of desire that had belonged to her alone.

At one time, they had been each other's worlds.

Not my demon… a different lifetime...

The thrusting grew more frantic, and so did the sucking as female who was being taken from behind grew greedy and joined the other, their tongues tangling over the demon's shaft.

He thrust up the moment her tongue slid along one of the tight orbs of his sack, filling the others throat, while blindly reaching for flesh, his hands leaving her waist.

The tip of her tongue traced along the curve of his ear while holding him tightly. He groaned, his fingers grasping for her waist.

"Too late demon. Feed and listen. You are King of the Nine Hells and ruler to all its denizens. Make them bow to you, whether they fear you or love you it matters not, as long as they do it while on their knees."

He shuddered, his hands trying to grab hold of flesh, but she held him tightly. "Nuh uh, easy on ladies… don't let him come just yet."

This earned her a snarl that would send any other creature running.

"Mara… I *need*…"

She bit into the sensitive lobe of his ear. "Can you do it demon, force them all to their knees?"

His arms broke free from her hold as he stretched down to pull his cock free from their greedy mouths. Instead he guided the blonde roughly up to his waist, and impaled her with a single hard thrust.

“I can…” His head falling back as he buried himself fully inside her. “I will...”

Behind him, Amara reached for another vial from the pocket of her robe, uncorking it and placing the edge against his lips.

“Then drink, King of Sin, and rule your kingdoms.”

Without hesitation he drank down the familiar elixir, the one that would kill his seed, preventing him from giving heirs.

At their side the male and female were quickly reaching a climax as their moans echoed through the room. Cassius’s own movements were growing frantic as he thrust home, causing the woman to cry out in pleasure, her sheath milking the last of his resistance each time he almost pulled out, only to fill her fully.

“Yes…”

He roared the word as lust saturated the air, and he siphoned it, gorging himself on the debauchery in his honor.

His hands released voluptuous flesh to grab a length of Mara’s hair just as she had been about to leave the bed, inhaling deeply of her scent.

He pulled her lips to his, his heated breaths moistening her lips, but not touching. He licked his lips, his tongue ghosting over hers, his eyes intense as they bored into hers.

“I am the ruler of Hell, and I’ll force it to bend to my will.”

Her hands slid down his sides as he spoke, her lips curling into an impish grin right as she sank her nails into his sides, and his first release hit.

He didn't stop after even spilling, instead continued his frenzied rutting. That and the wild and distant look in his eyes a telling sign the poison had taken complete hold of him. Lost in its fever, the sin-eater would continue to feed and fuck until fully sated.

“Assat-sa,” he mumbled deliriously, and her heart seized in her chest.

Impossible…

“Naga…”

The words kept her frozen her in place. Dark gods, how often did he call them out? Who had overheard?

She looked to her warlocks for any recognition of the rarely used Sumerian words, and was relieved to see they were all too caught up in their worship of him to pay any attention to his ramblings. Poisoned as he

was, they wouldn't think anything of him asking for his *wife*—of calling out for what was his.

Calling out for *her*.

A different life, a different girl, a different demon… not me. *Not anymore.*

Amara rushed off the bed, cold with shock, with more speed than her protesting body would allow, nearly causing her to face-plant upon the basalt stones of the floor.

She ached, she hurt, but she had kept her word. The demon would not be facing the arch-duchess at a disadvantage. Rather than finding him tormented and starved, Glasya would be finding a king.

Slinging her bag across her shoulder she let out a disheartened sigh and moved for the portal.

"And long may he reign."

16

WHAT DID WE LEARN HERE TODAY?

"YOU FOUND THE SWORD."

She hadn't taken two steps back into her bedchamber when the chilling voice of the Huntsman rang through the room.

"I did," she responded, setting her bag on the chair with more care than necessary, trying to keep her trembling contained. Dark gods curse that demon and his draw. Her body was in such a state of arousal, a good breeze could likely finish her off.

She turned to fully face the Dark Fae, his compelling aura more than she could ignore. He was long and lean and beautiful, his hair a pure black that fell in haphazard chunks around the starkly chiseled bones of his face.

His usual glamour was down, the ancient blue tattoos that ran from his hairline down the left side of his face, curling over shoulder and chest were completely visible. She'd asked about them once, the first time he'd allowed her to see, it had spiraled him into weeks-long madness.

"And?" He stretched out across her bed, patting the empty spot beside him. Presumptuous, yes, but they had been lovers for decades.

She took a steadying breath, trying to compose herself, then made her way over to him.

"It didn't work." She looked down to study his face. His eyes were bright, alert and showing no signs of his usual madness. "You knew it wouldn't."

He shrugged and rolled to his side, resting his hand on her knee and parting the fabric of her robes, her entire body shuddering in response.

“And just what have you been up to, milady?” His fingers trailed up, her breath caught in her throat as he watched her body’s response. “You’re in need and didn’t think to send for me?”

“Gwynn,” she gasped out.

“You smell like the demon.” Gwynn’s gaze flew back to hers, his eyes no longer sparkling with mischief.

He rolled over her, caging his arms around her body. “You went to see him?”

She nodded, a tad breathless, when the Fae’s hips settled between her legs and he rocked against her core. Her hands went to his shoulders, needing to hold him back for a moment, had to keep her head straight for just a minute longer.

“You knew the sword wouldn’t work.” She placed her hand on his cheek and he turned his head to suck her finger into his mouth.

One more minute.

Her body disagreed, rocking up against his hardness.

“Let me see to your needs,” he whispered in her ear, scattering her thoughts as goosebumps prickled down her neck, tightening her nipples into peaks, his clever fingers already strumming across them.

She groaned, “yes, just… right there…”

His fingers found her center, gently sliding through her slick heat, causing shock waves through her body. Dark gods, but she was already there.

“Naughty A’ stór,” he murmured against her neck as he trailed hot, wet kisses. “Your body is weeping for this.” He enunciated his words with plunging fingers.

He knew every place to touch, every tell of her body. And it was no wonder, Gwynn hadn’t only been her mentor on magics, he’d been the one to slowly reintroduce her to the pleasures of the flesh.

His fingers searched out exactly the spot she needed, pulling back over it roughly as his thumb found her clit and mouth found her breast.

Her blood went from liquid magma burning her from the inside, to atomic force explosion. She cried out, her hips rocking up into his touch, her back arching closer to his mouth.

He grunted out a rough groan, his mouth moving over hers to greedily drink down her cries, his fingers still circling, drawing out her response, setting off continual quakes through her body.

She'd barely caught her breath when his hands roughly turned her over and gripped her hips, pulling her up to her hands and knees. His breathing was frenzied, his hands gripping her hard, but he filled her slowly, feeding his erection in until she was so full of him she couldn't breathe.

They lay like that, breathing heavily, his thumb dragging back and forth across her shoulder, her own moisture trailing down the insides of her thighs.

Then he thrust hard, pulling back up to his knees to thrust harder.

"Uhgn… yes… please…" Insensible words were coming from her mouth, she was ready to beg.

"You went to see him?" He slammed into her with a punishing pace, her thoughts scattered. "After you promised to stay away?"

Her legs shook, her insides clenching, throbbing.

"He needed me," she groaned out.

Her hair was caught up in a tight grip, her face turned to the angry countenance of the Fae, his eyes turned fully gold, lost to madness.

He kissed her hard, deep, devouring her, filling her completely.

He pulled back, whispering against her lips, "I need you."

With a roar, he thrust home, so hard and deep, she shattered around him, her body melting into a boneless heap as he rocked against her, riding out his own orgasm, repeating his words over and over. *I need you.*

Funny, no one had ever asked what she needed.

He collapsed beside her, throwing his arm across his face, his breathing hard.

Her thoughts returned slowly, more focused after a couple blindingly good orgasms. He hadn't answered her about the sword. Fae couldn't lie—he was avoiding the question. Damn distracting male.

"Why didn't you tell me the sword wouldn't work?" She huffed and pulled the blanket from beneath her to cover them up, no fire had been lit to chase away the chill of the night.

"There was a good chance it would have." His eyes slid to hers, back to their normal electric blue.

She scoffed. "Exactly what were my chances?"

He bit down on his lip, she knew he was weighing his words.

"Don't even think to twist words, Huntsman." She reached over with her finger to pull his lip from his teeth.

“Maybe sixty percent.” He closed his eyes, then peeked over when she didn’t answer right away.

Sixty percent was good odds? She’d set herself up for failure, had nearly died in the process, and oh yeah—had wrought death upon the population of an entire realm.

“It was still worth pursuing. There aren’t many ways to side-step a compact with a god.”

She let out a small screech of indignation. “I DIDN’T MAKE THE CONTRACT.” She threw the blankets from her overheating body and jumped out of bed.

He grabbed her hand and held her in place, keeping her from storming off.

She kept her eyes averted, not wanting him to see how crushed she was. With everything she tried and failed, hope was a swiftly dimming candle. The only thing more frightening than the disappointment which inevitably followed hope, was the loss of it.

“I’m doing what I can to find a way out for you,” he said, his thumb tracing hypnotic circles around her wrist. “Just stay away from the demon. Please.”

Her back stiffened, then her entire body as white-hot rage blared through her.

“You don’t get to dictate my actions,” she said, her voice trembling with menace.

“Amara. Mo’ stór.” His voice soothed, calmed. Damned tricksy Fae. “Be reasonable. Think on the repercussions.”

She yanked her arm from his grip and stormed off into her shower, turning it as hot as she could stand. She didn’t calm down until the hot water flowed over her.

Anyone you love, anyone who dares to love you is cursed to die.

She couldn’t stay mad at the Fae. He was right. She couldn’t put Cass at risk. Not Cass. Sin.

Letting out an exasperated groan she pressed her forehead against the cool stone wall. Lines were crossed and blurred, clearly affecting her judgement. Ever since he had come to her cell over a hundred and twenty years ago, she had been diligent in maintaining her distance from the sin-eater. So what had changed?

She drifted off, safe in the arms of the Huntsman, remembering—reminding herself what he was. Not her Cassius. But he also wasn't his father, and he needed a friend.

"GET OUT!" Cassius shouted.

"DAMN IT CASSIUS LOOK AT HER! Go through with this, and you're no better than him. And I'll serve you no longer." Azadiel snarled back at him.

He knelt in front of her, assessing the damage her cell visitors had been responsible for, that he'd made worse by unleashing his power upon her.

"Finish what you started sin-eater, I dare you. You came to destroy me? THEN FUCKING DO IT ALREADY!" Her words cut off with a dry sob.

"Dark Gods…" He spread her thighs, gently as he could, wincing. "Easy now, I'll get a healer to see to you."

His hands were shaking as he carefully secured his shirt around her lower body. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I don't understand…"

"Cass…?" her voice was soft, her eyes searching his expression.

He held her gaze, clinging to her as if she were an anchor. "I am not my father."

"No, you are not..."

"No matter your choice, whether you help me overthrow my father or not, I promise you that you'll be free, I won't allow anyone to hurt you again."

"You're going to overthrow your father?"

"Azadiel tells me you're the rightful High Priestess of Asurim. Your realm is dying, and your people along with it. Their usefulness to the demonarchy is only reason the warlocks have managed to survive for this long without their high priestess. I imagine that's why my father put you here in the first place..."

His hands ran up the chains, giving a sharp tug where they hooked into the wall, then his intense gaze locked onto hers.

"I need an ally in that realm. I need the power that can be diverted from their kind. Your kind."

"And you'll free me?" She narrowed her eyes.

He let out a surge of infernal magic he'd learned at his father's knee, popping the chains open at once. He helped her to her feet, bracing her

until she had her balance. How long had it been since she'd fully stood?

"You won't be able to walk out of here. There are things in the works, but if you aid me, Warlock, you can count on my support to regain your realm."

"When? When will you free me from here?"

"When I feel that I can fully trust you." His eyes sparked with malice, but in their depths, she saw his wariness. She knew how few beings were on his side.

"I'll have a healer sent down," he looked her up and down, "and a decent meal."

17

HELP SOMETIMES COMES FROM THE LEAST EXPECTED PLACES

IT WAS CLEAR SHE DIDN'T WANT TO BE HERE. HELLS AND HE HADN'T EVEN been sure she'd come back after that disaster. He couldn't meet her eyes. He knew, logically, that she'd seen him feed—many times—he'd never involved her before.

Talk about blurring lines. She deserved more from him, and he'd acted like a helpless child. That time had long since passed.

He zoned out, words floating up from his fuzzed thoughts.

"*I'm a sin-eater, if I don't learn to feed, I'll eventually wither away.*"

"*Is it that bad? Can't you refuse?*" The sweet tones whispered through his mind, sounding affronted on his behalf.

"*I just want to hide down here with you, you're my only friend.*"

He shook his head, keeping focus on the present. Effects from the poison lingered, his muddled mind slipping into these new fantasies. He leaned back against the wall, arms crossed over himself, watching Mara unpack things from her bag, startled at how naturally she fit in his rooms.

His thumb drew back and forth across the mark over his heart he hadn't bothered to glamour today. He needed it to remind himself he could trust her. She didn't have a choice and neither did he. It was almost… relaxing. He could let down his guard and breathe.

"He's gone today?" Mara set one more thing on his dresser and turned to face him, her eyes not meeting his. "Cass! Basileus? Is he gone?"

He blinked. She called him by name—no longer just demon, or sin-eater? She cleared her throat, reminding him she'd asked a question.

“Oh. Yeah. He uh, went to escort Glasya…?”

“You don’t sound sure of that.”

He pushed himself up from the wall and wandered to his side table to pour a glass of water. Dammit. Thoughts together.

He took a long swallow and turned back to her. “Yeah, I’m sure. Thoughts aren’t keeping up with me today.” His hand rubbed across her sigil, pondering why it felt dead today compared to… he probably just needed to feed more.

“*They want to train me. I don’t want this.”* His voice, his words, his thoughts weren’t providing context.

“*They won’t… hurt you?”*

Mara’s hand tapped at his cheek. “You’re drinking enough water?”

“Concerned, Priestess?” He held up the glass in his hand. “I know to purge the remnants. My mind just hasn’t been right, I think since the sword—”

Her mouth snapped shut. “Perhaps you’d better ease back on the doses.”

“No.” He cut over her words. He needed it. The oblivion and the ecstasy— “You brought everything we’re going to need?”

“We?” She moved a step back from him and he put his hand to her back. She glared up at him, her teeth clenched. “Yes, I brought everything necessary. Let’s get this over with.”

“So eager to be away from me?” He smiled wide, picking up her hand in his, pushing on her back with his other hand until they were chest to chest.

“I thought we agreed to be friends?”

“You agreed,” she said, her jaw still tight, her eyes still averted. “Clearly you’re suffering delusions.”

“Come on Mara. Think of how much fun we’re about to have. I’m looking forward to seeing the look on Bas’s face.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know that Bas will keep his mouth shut. We’re ruining his schemes.”

“He can’t gainsay our witnesses.”

He swayed with her to a beat that played only in his mind. Haunting, familiar, but just out of grasp. He leaned down, whispering in her ear, pretending not to notice her shiver.

“I’ve got my majordomo, the hall is full of ranking nobles, and Vesarius the Warlord is leading the training down in the Pits today.” He spun her around, his hand encasing hers. “Couldn’t have lined things up better if we’d planned.”

She huffed out an exasperated breath, trying to tug her hand back. “Demon. This was *supposed* to be planned.”

She’d planned. Given him exact details of all that he needed to do. Line up witnesses to confirm they saw the woman he’d killed alive and walking through the Malsheem. Mara would provide a warlock to make this look as though the female was dying due to a spurned love.

“I planned what I could.” His body had taken an entire day to recover from that last bout of poison, he didn’t want to admit that to Mara. That he’d done nothing but languish since she’d left, and now his sister was all but on his doorstep.

He tightened his grip and yanked her in close. “Let’s get this done. I haven’t fed yet today.”

He intentionally ran his eyes down her body, then back up. Only to stop at her eyes. They weren’t furious as he’d expected—she looked… *sad*.

He let her go at once, turning to fix his sword to his belt.

“So what did he do to piss you off?” Cass asked with a nod toward the enthralled warlock that stood in the corner. *Time to stop pushing her.*

He pulled his sword from its sheath, examining it. He hadn’t meant to offend her, not any more than he already had during her last visit. All the hells, he could still remember the taste of her lust…

She growled, snagging his attention back. “Some of my people are vocal in opposing my stance on the Blood Cleansing rituals. I thought it time to remove the more pertinent voices.”

Cass just nodded. She’d told him about the blood cleansings before, her people basically practicing genocide on their own already endangered race for the sake of pride and bloodline. A counterintuitive practice. Hard-pressed to garner power when your people were weak and sparse.

And they were friends now. He’d support her, merely because she supported him. She didn’t have to be here today, offering to use her powers to clean up a mess of his own making.

“This is a bad death for him.” He grimaced. The thought of her zombies feeding… “And you won’t even have him as an example.”

She smiled, a little too bright to be comforting. “Removing him from the situation is good enough.” She shrugged. “And it’s helping you. So step back, demon and let me work.”

There was definite warmth in his stomach, a pleasant warmth. She was doing this for him.

He slid his sword back into its sheath and moved back to the wall, openly curious in his observation.

“You did track down her name?” Mara asked with that condescending arch of her brow.

His cheeks heated. “I looked it up. Batna Paeliryon.” Guilt still churned in his gut.

“Demon,” Mara said, tone sharp. Cass met her eyes again. “What did I tell you about self-pity?”

He grinned. “I’m better than that.”

She nodded. “We are what we are, and because of it, those around us get hurt.”

An impish grin tugged at the corner of her lips. “Come here Sin, you can stay in my circle while I cast.” She held out her hand and he grasped it like a lifeline. He could shield himself, but he’d much rather be obscured by her magic and rendered undetectable. The undead made him uneasy.

“You’ll keep me safe from the ravenous zombies?” He lay his arms over her shoulders, rocking back and forth.

“They aren’t zombies,” she snarled.

“They eat brains. Haven’t you seen the movies?” He smiled, but his insides clenched. He could joke, but it seriously disturbed him to watch corpses cannibalizing their own species. The visual almost prophetic.

Mara slapped his chest. “Okay hush. I need to focus.”

“Can I hold you?” He smiled down at her.

Her brows drew together. “You can’t touch me at all while I’m using my magic.” Her cheeks flushed, and she turned to study her accessories that spread across the top of his dresser.

“I know that Mara. I was teasing.” He curled his finger under her chin and tilted her face back to his. “I wouldn’t dream of judging you for using this power.” *Not when she’d seen how he used his.*

She rolled her eyes. “Well gee, I guess I can sleep well tonight.” She snarked, but her body visibly relaxed. The tension around her eyes easing.

The candle flames briefly flared, and he felt the pressure of her power heavy in his chest.

“Batna Paeliryon, I summon you from the depths…”

18

IT'S STILL MY TURN

He lazed across the gilded iron throne, as much as one could laze about on thinly cushioned metal. His leg thrown over one of the arms, his elbow propped on the other, holding up his head, trying to affect boredom. Though he felt anything but.

His sister had this coming. He was so damned tired of being a pawn in another's game.

Strike. Counterstrike.

Generally, he stayed out of his half-sister's way. She was cold and vicious, a replica of their father at his worst, encompassing the most cutting traits of their sire. She had no love to spare for her bastard brother, who'd taken her place as heir to the throne.

This needed to work.

He felt Basileus's presence as the demon stepped in at the right of his throne. He was concerningly attuned to the other demon's energy, the constant sharing the same bed had them more intimate than lovers. He stifled a shudder. Though it could be argued they were.

He tilted his head back to look up at the stunning demon. No, he wouldn't invite the demon and his scheming back into his bed. He couldn't afford to have his father's Herald making moves against him as they shared pillow talk into the nights.

Bas looked down at him, his finger tracing from Cass's eyebrow down the side of his face, stopping at his mouth.

“You’re prepared for this?” he said, pushing lightly against Cass’s bottom lip. “Her Herald is demanding blood.”

His touch felt wrong, his words irritated. And when Basileus had threatened Amara, a deep-seated anger suffused him. Only her calming touch and his own hunger had held him back.

Cass gathered himself, hoping his acting skills were up to snuff.

“You should rise to greet her, my lord.” Basileus’s voice only carried as far as Cass’s ear. “It wouldn’t do to infuriate the Grand Duchess, and spurn a potential ally.”

Cass lowered his lids and pulled back from Basileus’s wandering fingers. He already had an ally, one he could trust. And with her help they would put an end to their scheming. Today’s events would make for a good show not soon forgotten.

“Thank you for the advice. However, perhaps it’s in Glasya’s best interest not to anger *me*.”

He sat up, righting the twisted metal headpiece that served as his crown and surveyed the room. Acts of raucous debauchery were going on unheeded, the air fragrant with sin and lust, a familiar backdrop in the Nessus fortress where all types of sins were celebrated.

The great hall was lined with basalt and obsidian pillars, Cass’s throne facing down the center towards where the halls opened to a wall-to-wall veranda that overlooked the infamous pits. Stairs separated the balconies, numbering in the hundreds, he’d never counted the number of steps that visitors to his fortress would have to climb. Those on intimate terms had access to the main portal, anyone else was forced to scale those stairs, a maneuver to physically exhaust them and put them at a disadvantage. His father’s penchant for giving himself the upper hand reflected in every design and decision made.

Glasya and her entourage would be cresting the entry to the halls at any moment, today’s entertainment queued up and ready to be unleashed.

Anytime now.

“BATNA,” a mournful cry echoed through the Hall. “How could you?” The shouts growing closer.

He hid his grin with a swipe of his thumb. Straight face. Brazen this out.

There, in the peripheries, he saw Amara’s warlock traitor stumbling behind pillars, running as though his life depended on it. Because it did.

The warlock would soon find himself with a difficult choice to make; how to die.

Personally, Cass would certainly find the sharp crevasses of the pits a preference to being eaten alive.

The hall went silent, some demons chasing the warlock, Bas himself at attention and peering around Cass to see what the disruption was. A warlock in the Nessus was enough to cause a stir, fortunately most would mistake him for a new addition to the harem.

Glasya entered the hall in the midst of the stunned silence, her presence oppressive and suffocating. She was close to a thousand years old, her mother had been a power in her own right, add that to the power she inherited from their father—she was going to test his resolve.

Time to see which of them inherited more of their father's cunning.

He could feel her eyes on him as she studied him, the icy exchange prompting the entire court in attendance to observe them with bated breath. Time was suspended in a moment of tense silence, then her mouth turned up into a vicious mockery of a smile.

He studied her in turn. Her hair was long and dark, her eyes more grey than blue. She wore black silk robes held together with diamond studded silver chains, the fire-lit halls reflecting rainbows from the diamonds over the matte silk. There was nothing of his father in her looks, which made it easier to deal with her.

"Well, look at my father's heir, all puffed up on his own self-importance." She chuckled humorlessly.

"Young Cassius has done well for himself." She spoke to her Herald, while maintaining eye contact with Cass.

"And from such humble beginnings. Bastard born son of the most powerful demon in the Nine Hells, and a questionable female of a forgotten race. Tell me—has your mother faded altogether from mortal memory?"

She stepped closer to his throne, Cass having to look down at her. "Does she have any power left to speak of, or has her first-born son usurped that as well?"

Whatever vile words were next to come out of her mouth were cut off by shouts, louder than before.

"BATNA… I can't live with this!" The warlock's cries caused Glasya to stop speaking, her head cocked as she studied Cass.

Poker face. He stared Glasya down, arching his brow, daring her to comment. Her poor Herald stood behind her, wringing his hands and looking around, as though searching for… and there she was, his missing daughter making her grand entrance.

You couldn't *pay* for theatre like this in the Hells.

Every eye in the room followed the warlock as he ran through the hall and out to the balcony, sweat beading clearly on his gaunt face, only Cass knew that it was fear behind his expression, not grief. The Warlock climbed onto the balcony rail, Cass cringing at the thought of the jagged spires below. Then shrugged. Still more pleasant than having your brains feasted upon.

Glasya's herald stumbled back as though cold-cocked to the face, his pallor turning ghostly white as he watched his daughter amble down the hall and out toward the balcony.

"Batna!" He called out for her, the woman not even turning her attention to him.

He was fortunate in that. Unless you had someone to push in front of you, it was never a good idea to draw the attention of a zombie.

The rest of Glasya's retainers stopped on either side of the entrance, every one of them riveted upon the scene playing out.

"Batna you were mine!" The warlock wailed and took a step back. He balanced for a moment, enough time for sentience to flash through his eyes. Typical Amara, she released her power over him just in time to make him aware of his impending death. His cry pitched, then the warlock dropped.

Zombie-Batna wailed, her arms circling, grasping for the warlock, a moment too late. She threw back her head with a howling cry. One could almost mistake it as agony of the soul. But no, it was hunger. Her dinner had just slipped through her grasp.

The entire room took a collective breath as 'Batna' climbed up and over the balcony. To watch a warlock succumb to death was one thing, but this was a Princess of the Hells.

"Batna! No! Do not do this thing." Moloch, Glasya's herald, took off in a run, Glasya's soldiers falling in behind.

For a moment, he managed to capture the female's attention. In that moment, Cass lost his breath. All could be lost. He edged forward in his seat, his hands gripping the armrests.

Yet as she turned to him, she lost her grip. In the expanse of a second she stared mindlessly into the eyes of her father, her fingers slipped from the rail, her feet lost purchase—and she was gone.

“You did this.” Glasya hissed.

“Since I have no control over what females do in my fortress, I’ll have to disagree. Why are you here Glasya?” He let a bit of power seep out, enough to make the walls tremble.

The ringing of weapons being drawn echoed through the silent hall, and with a motion of his finger, his own retinue drew arms. He didn’t necessarily want this to end in war, but never let it be said he wasn’t prepared.

“Tell your soldiers to stand down, and we’ll move to the dining room,” Cass said, keeping his tone even.

“Convenient is it not, that the woman we came seeking just happens to meet her demise at the precise moment of our arrival?” Glasya held herself imperially. “Sloppy, little brother.”

Cass bared his teeth. “Coincidental rather than convenient, I’d say. It’s my understanding that the warlocks are a prideful and passionate race, not surprising poor Batna found herself smitten with one. It’s all very tragic.”

He could see the black of her pupils dilate ever so slightly as realization struck. Glasya had come to the Nessus believing herself holding all the cards, only to find that he and Amara had altered the game.

He shrugged, staring her down as he stood, towering over her. “By the by, our father sends his regards.”

Shock drained the color from her face, and Cass walked down the stairs to stand directly in front of her, Basileus following.

“You’ve seen him?” she hissed.

Ah yes, her power was a palpable thing. So was her envy. Such a powerful, corruptible sin. He sucked it all in, the barriers of her mind faltering with his invasion.

Her eyes sparked, the blue brightening. “Did you just feed off me, brother?”

Cass stilled. She’d felt that?

He leaned in, so he could speak in her ear. “Your envy is a veritable feast, Duchess. I advise you to rein it in.”

“Do it again, boy, and your balls will be on my bedside table.”

Cass smiled. “Good to know kink runs in the family.”

He placed his hand to her back and prodded her forward, his eyes wandering to the side of the hall. There he found Mara peeking out from the shadows of the corridor leading back to his private suites, meeting her smirk with one of his own.

In the dining room they were met by simpering minions who set them up with drinks and place settings while trying to maintain invisibility. His sister sat at his left, the rest of their entourage a few seats down, so they could have a private conversation.

Glasya looked over to him, daintily sipping her wine, her eyes scrutinizing his features, probably comparing them to their father's, as he was doing to her. Or perhaps she was pondering her next move, since he and Mara had just swept the board clean. The war she'd come to pick with him neatly averted.

"You have no heirs?" She finally spoke.

Cass turned and focused on his own drink. "I have no need for heirs. Nor any desire for progeny."

"Your position is a precarious one." She replied absently, though Cass knew to take it as a thinly veiled threat. "I have many willing females who could bear you a strong child."

"Thank you, but no." Cass motioned for food to be brought in.

"So, my condolences to your Herald. Care to explain why after all this time you've decided on a social call?"

This is how they operated, with neither of them calling each other out on the power play at hand. They'd just continue to circle one another while awaiting their moment to strike.

"Why, to start a war, Cassius." She smiled, and this time it lit up her eyes. She had a back-up plan and Cass was now at a disadvantage. *Side-step, counterstrike*. "Levistus has been at my heels for many centuries. He fell to the corruption and became obsessed with my poor mother. It's no secret I hold him responsible for Benzosia's death, it's why he regards me as an enemy. Since father stripped his titles, he's taken to growing armies. I'm surprised you weren't aware. Large armies, building up within your realms," her tone was blatantly snide.

"I took up the throne five years ago," Cass said, popping a grape into his mouth. "So, no. I am not entirely aware of all the intrigues yet. But I am becoming informed."

“Five years which you wasted slumming in the mortal realm,” she spoke over her glass.

Her Herald re-joined them, his grief sucking up all the energy in the room and replacing it with a mournful pall, she stopped laughing, studying him, then drank down her glass of wine.

“You have capacity for much power,” she spoke low, “but lack the heart for the intrigues.”

Cass smiled. “Our father said as much just a few days ago.”

“Our father should’ve crushed Levistus when the evidence pointed to him for my mother’s death. It was the first of many weaknesses the great Asmodeus showed.” She looked over Cass’s expression again. “One cannot have tender feelings and maintain an iron fisted rule.”

Cass took offense, and he wasn’t sure if it was for his own sake, or at the slur against his father.

“Asmodeus’s power was and still is incomparable. His undoing was in making a play for power that was beyond even him.”

The play that he and Mara had set up over decades. Tiny, overly complex pieces that played off the next, leading to the eventual downfall of a power too great to be contained. They had strategically scattered misleading evidence for the realms factions to find, had whispered into the right ears. Fearing his father’s expanding power, the heavens had been forced to step in and remove Asmodeus from his throne. It had been an elegant coup.

“And so unlike him.” Glasya eyed him carefully.

Cass was careful to school his expression. “Truly? I’ve never known him any different.”

She lifted her glass to her lips, but halted mid air. “I need your legions at my back. Levistus will be brought down this time for good. I’ll see him slit from gullet to groin and watch him as his insides spill out from his waiting hands and onto the floor at his feet. Then I’ll hang him over my pits and watch him roast and regenerate until I fail to be amused by it.”

She ended her rant with a long swallow, giving Cass time to absorb the viciousness. The underlying anger.

“I’ll grant you legions, providing you bring me proof of his crimes. Crimes against me that is. I see no reason to get involved in a feud between the two of you,” he spoke slowly, sipping at his drink, anticipating her outburst.

Basileus was suddenly at his side, hand on his shoulder, as though to hold him back.

“You impertinent little fuck!” Glasya yelled, jumping to her feet and slamming her hands on the table so hard the dishes rattled.

Cass couldn’t jump up to challenge her, because Bas was holding him down, warning him to stay in his place. So he did the next best thing, and fed off her wrath. The energy struck him like a jolt of adrenaline, hardening his cock and making his heart speed up. Unable to resist, he drew in some more.

Glasya swayed on her feet, her own Herald jumping behind her to prop her up. Her eyes narrowed, teeth bared.

“I could rip out your throat. Then we’d see just how proud father is of you.” Her voice was weak, but still full of ire.

Proud? Their father had never been proud of him.

“Or you could have a nice little nap.” Cass pushed Bas’s hand aside and stood. “The poison you just ingested should put you out until morning.” He notched his chin toward the wine bottle that sat half empty.

He stepped in front of her, picking up her chin, her steel-blue eyes blazing with power she wouldn’t be able to tap into.

“We’ll call it hedging my bets. You get to have a nice, safe sleepover, and I get to assess the situation without interference.” He could plan for contingencies just as well as she could.

“Moloch if you’ll follow Basileus, he’ll show you to a room. Afterwards you can bring me all of the information my sister has gathered on Levistus.” He ignored the pang of guilt at the Herald’s grief-stricken countenance.

“Yes, highness. Though, there are countless tomes.” Moloch stammered, his voice hoarse.

He settled a cold glare on the ancient demon, trying not to notice the similarities to the woman.

“Then bring me the pertinent information.”

“There was a reason my father didn’t act against Levistus, and I’ll not go into this blind.”

Glasya came here to start a war, and he’d thwarted her, it wasn’t right for him to sit back and watch her attention turn to another. He was King and it was time for him to take up those reins.

He turned to Basileus, put his hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear.

“You don’t want to play this game with me. You may be good, but I learned its rules at the knee of the one who fucking invented it.”

19

JUST MAKE UP MY MIND FOR ME

HE LEANED OVER THE ARM OF HIS CHAISE, ABSENTLY FLIPPING THROUGH the pages of the large volume. Basileus lay over his lap, his knees up, propping up his own book. Occasionally, the fire crackled, breaking through the silence of the room. They'd been at it for most of the night, both dozing off in the books and getting right back into them when they'd woken.

All he'd gathered was useless information, emotionally charged rants, amended notes that told Cassius how severely imbalanced Glasya was. Cold, calculating, and obviously viewing things from a set perspective.

Any evidence she'd gathered was to the end of supporting her mindset, and Cass was left to wonder if she would even be capable of perceiving facts any other way. It was up to him to be objective.

"What are you thinking?" Bas asked, flipping a large page.

Cass forgot that the demon could sometimes pick up on emotions. He'd have to take more care in keeping a tight rein whenever he was around, which was constantly. Strange how that never bothered before, he'd craved his attention—now it grated. For the moment Glasya's visit provided him with an excuse for the growing unease he felt.

He wasn't a fool, had always suspected a conspiracy afoot, but for some inexplicable reason had never been able to envision Basileus playing a part in it. Perhaps because of the intimacy they shared.

With the exception of orchestrating his father's downfall, he had made the Prince of Pleasures privy to his every desire, every hope he held, and

every trouble which plagued him. Not this time, not ever again.

It felt as if he were tapping into an undercurrent, a reality revealed by the lifting of a veil.

“Levistus really did kill Glasya’s mother?” *Keep the subject neutral.*

Bas shifted his legs, his book now laying flat and looked up at Cass.

“The answer to that question depends on who you ask. Levistus has allies amongst the denizens of Hell who would like nothing better than to see him acquitted of that charge.”

Had that been a deflection? “I’m asking you.”

A lazy stretch followed, one that usually served to pull his focus to Bas’s chest and hips. Awareness surged. The beguiling prince was practicing his wiles by seducing him. And with that awareness came perception — not just seducing, distracting him.

“Levistus was arrogant and in love with Benzosia, wanted her for himself. Our Queen Consort was loyal to Asmodeus and rebuked the advances made by the Prince of Secrets, Benzosia’s refusal sent him into a jealous rage. Your father was devastated at finding his most cherished possession, his queen, murdered in cold blood. Even then Asmodeus could not bring himself to kill Levistus, instead he sentenced him to spend eternity buried alive within the ice of the Stygia.”

“My father is incapable of love,” Cass added, drumming his fingers across the pages of the book underhand.

Bas turned to look up at the ceiling, pulling an arm behind his head, brushing all the way up the inside of Cass’s leg as he did it.

“I am unsure why you would think that Cassius.” Bas ran a hand up his side and Cass’s whole body tensed. “The heavens created him to uphold justice and love unconditionally, it was circumstance that shaped him into what he needed to be. He sacrificed himself — good can’t exist without evil, there’s no Heaven without a Hell to balance it.”

He grabbed Bas’s hand and held it still, those wandering fingers irritating Cass to the point his teeth were grinding, the veneer he wore cracking.

“He didn’t love *her*, though. That’s all I meant Bas.” Cass glowered down at the other demon, shifting so that Bas’s arm wasn’t pressing directly against his semi-hard erection.

“Meaning, perhaps Benzosia would have left my father for Levistus. To be truly loved above all else, could any demon aspire to anything

greater?”

Bas glowered, snatching his hand back. “That seems far-fetched and optimistic. We are demons. You’re attributing virtuous qualities to irredeemable beings.”

“No one is irredeemable,” Cass said, squeezing his eyes closed.

“Cassius,” Bas sat up, letting the book drop to the floor, before turning over to straddle his waist. “Whose redemption do you think one such as you needs?” Bas leaned over and gave him a rough kiss. “Your power grows daily. You rule over all the Nine Hells, one day you will need answer to none. Then you’ll understand that power is more satisfactory than love.” Bas’s hands gently cradled his face.

Cass flinched back, his sexual hunger growing to the point where temptation to take Bas was overruling trepidation. His power was a weakness, one Bas knew how to exploit.

“I think we should summon Levistus and let him speak for himself. So far, I’ve seen no evidence of him acting against me,” Cass said, re-routing the conversation back to less intimate grounds.

“You think *you* can summon up Levistus?” Bas perked up, intent now on the book Cass had been paging through. “He’s remained trapped there for centuries.”

“I can,” he said with an assurance he didn’t feel. His power was growing, he still had no concept of how much was available to tap into.

“I want to see this.” Bas’s expression was lit up with humor, and behind that, Cass could see the gloating.

He didn’t think Cass would be able to do it.

20

ALWAYS, WITH THE POWER PLAYS

"Thanks for your contribution, Bas." Habit and guilt had Cass place a gentle kiss on the inside of the other demon's arm, where he had sliced straight across to make him bleed.

No sense in Cass himself being witless with blood loss. Not when he had to summon forth one of his father's former adversaries.

Carpets pulled aside he drew on the stone floor of his private quarters, using Bas's blood to detail the circle with Levistus's summoning sigil. Already he could sense the power building, energy humming and icy cold as he closed the marking in an unbreakable circle.

"You're ready, my lord? The summoning circle needs to remain intact, Levistus has no love lost for your father." Basileus spoke as he wrapped his arm in fresh bandages, the effort more for show since the cut would take little time to heal.

Cass nodded. "Yes, well. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

He side-eyed the still smug Basileus. "You're not even certain I can accomplish this."

Unlike the Prince of Pleasures, he didn't question his own ability, his power to summon the Hells to him matched his father's.

Basileus held out his hand, gesturing to the complex sigil. "We won't know until you try."

"I could have tried sooner if I'd been apprised of what Glasya's intentions were." He watched Bas's expression close off, confirming he

was right to be uneasy. “Seems my sister has been keeping more secrets than we were aware of.”

He watched Bas sigh with relief. Awareness was a tricky thing, it tended to leave one with more questions than answers, and the need to discover the truth was growing more urgent.

Amara had upon occasion referred to the Nessus as a viper’s nest, at the time he had discarded the comment as simply a result of her sharp tongue and dislike for Basileus, he didn’t believe that to be the case any longer.

The Priestess knew things, secrets which she tended to keep to herself. No, if he was to unearth the nest and purge his house, then he would need to find the answers for himself.

He held out his hands, calling up Levistus, power pouring into the summons — far more than he’d anticipated.

It was considered bad form for demons to summon one another, since they knew how uncomfortable it was to be the one on the inside, however, Cass wasn’t about to go searching the Stygia for Levistus. After he was stripped of titles he had vanished from the archives, no more than a side-note of his frozen grave to be found.

With a wet thunk, a frost covered demon landed in the circle, curling into a ball, an anguished roar building up into a crescendo, echoing through the room as the demon uncurled.

Cass looked over to Basileus, expecting some sort of explanation, but the demon just looked on with a self-satisfied smirk, lids hooded.

“So.” Glasya entered the room with a regal sweep, eyes glued to the pathetic heap inside of the circle that was still moaning and whimpering.

“Little Cassius managed to break one of the great Asmodeus’s spells.” She tittered, clapping her hands with glee. “Break the circle. Give him to me.”

She barked the order to Bas, who made a move to step forward to obey her command.

Again, awareness came to him. Slowly, but he did just expend a great deal of power, so his mush brain could be pardoned.

Bas had volunteered his blood not to aid him, but to be in control over the summoning circle, he had unknowingly surrendered the power to free Levistus. Levistus had been caught up in one of his father’s spells, neither

Glasya nor Basileus were powerful enough to break, Cassius was, and he had just played right into his sister's hands.

The puzzling warning his priestess had given on the day he had ascended his father's throne boomed through him his sluggish thoughts.

You must always keep one eye open when sleeping inside a viper's nest, sin-eater.

How had he failed to noticed Basileus conspiring with Glasya before? True he had been distracting himself with other things, but surely he would've noticed. Amara had known, she'd tried to warn him, then why was he only just now beginning to see the extent of it for himself?

The room shook around them as his anger built.

"Make one move towards that circle, Basileus, and I'll chain you by the neck to a corner of my bedroom for the rest of eternity."

Basileus visibly swallowed, shooting a glance to Glasya before backing up against the wall.

Cass turned on his sister, her chin was high, eyes gleaming with malice as she looked upon Levistus. Cass stepped toward her, capturing her attention, her expression faltering minutely.

He took another step, forcing her to retreat. Then another, until her back was against the wall.

"You used me. To break him free. Why?" He spoke low, trying to hide the absolute rage in his voice.

"I couldn't get to him," she said, a slight tremble giving away her nervousness.

He made her uneasy. Good.

"You couldn't get to him to kill him. You told me he was raising armies. Lies upon lies." Cass pressed forward even more, their bodies nearly touching.

Her breath hitched and sped up, the scent of her desire tauntingly familiar. Awkward, but Cassius oozed lust. He couldn't help it, couldn't hold back the infectiousness of it. It was his nature.

"He was…is" She swallowed hard. "Telepathically. Through his Herald."

"And what threat is that to me?" He raised his hand and gripped her arm to hold her steady. "Armies with no command…" His mind was catching up. "To protect against you. He was left defenseless, merely sought protection—against you."

She pulled her arm from his grip, but he wouldn't let her side-step him.

"This is how the game is played, youngling." She bared her teeth with a hiss, trying to shrink back from him.

"He killed my mother. The only person I had I could trust. I am *owed*," she screeched, trying to push back with her power.

He took it all in. absorbed it as though it were his own.

Her jaw dropped, fear shining in her eyes.

Then she glared, and he braced himself. "You wouldn't know about a bond with a mother, since yours sold you away like the mongrel mutt that you are."

He flinched anyway.

He had nothing but warm, fuzzed emotions left of his mother. Lies as well?

"I know all about revisionist history, dear sister," he snarled out. "And until this creature," he swept out his hand in gesture towards the mewling heap, "can speak for himself, you'll have none of my Legions. I am withdrawing my welcome. You are banished from my realm until I seek you out."

He closed his eyes and set the cast, effectively banishing his sister and any of her minions from the Sixth. From one moment to the next, she was gone from his sight.

His hands still trembled with rage, and no outlet.

Except.

He turned to Bas. "You knew this. You helped her to plot against me, while knowing she allies with our father, who even as we speak is plotting my downfall."

He grabbed Basileus by the throat and pushed him against the wall. He was breathing heavily, had to take a moment to steady himself, resting his forehead to the stone above Bas's shoulder.

The putrid little shit had been gloating because he'd been setting Cass up for a fall.

Bas's hands came up, grasping for him, resting on either side of his face.

"I did it for you, Cassius. You need to know…"

Cass squeezed his hand tighter, cutting off the demon's twisting words. Then dropped him, stepping back as Bas landed on the floor.

“Break the circle and leave me.” Cass said evenly. Bas made no move to get up. “LEAVE MY SIGHT,” he shouted, and Bas scrambled to his feet, kicking at the line of blood until it was broken, then scurried from the room without looking back.

Cass hauled the demon to his feet, soaked and looking bluish around the lips—still incoherent. He propped him up and walked him to the door, handing him off to two of the guards stationed there.

“Put him in a cell. Come and get me when he reclaims his wits,” Cass barked the order, then slammed the door.

His mind was blank, yet racing, as he made his way back into his bedroom, slamming and locking the door before falling to his knees and digging his hands into his hair.

He had no one on his side. No one he could fucking trust. He’d chosen the wrong pieces for his board and every fucking move that followed was never going to be right.

“*You’re letting them win*.” His ghost was back, and he was beginning to fear he was losing his mind completely. She’d never been sentient before.

“I’m not. They tricked me. Played me a fool.” His head was ringing, the power of breaking that spell doubling back and overloading his synapses.

“*It’s your game. It always has been. You need to set the rules and stop playing by others’ expectations*.”

He shook his head. He didn’t like that she was angry with him.

“It’s not a game to me,” he whispered out loud, to no one but the ghost in his mind. “It’s a fight to survive.”

“*Your compassion is a crutch,*” a new voice floated up from his memories, not his ghost, a male. “*It’s holding you back. You need to let it go*.”

He shook his head harder. “No. No, it keeps me from becoming a monster. From becoming like him,” he shouted, jumping to his feet and swiping his arm across his dresser, knocking everything to the floor.

“*You’re not a monster,*” his ghost whispered soothingly. “*If you were a monster, how could I love you this much?*”

21

SOMEONE? ANYONE?

HE TURNED THE RED RUBBER BALL IN HIS HANDS. A REMNANT OF someone's childhood. He'd found it in an alley by his apartment in the mortal realm, collected it and brought it back to his room here. The sight of it made him yearn for something indefinable.

He tilted the wooden chair back on two legs, his body nearly stretching the width of the narrow hall. The main dungeons of the Nessus weren't part of his fortress as a whole, maze like halls attached them, but they'd never got modern upgrades the rest of the Malsheem had been treated to. The halls were still lit with enclosed flame, shadows and dim light played against the walls, the surrounding stone absorbing any traveling sound.

Except the bouncing of the ball. That echoed nicely. Gave him something to listen to other than his own thoughts.

He tossed it again. Bounce from the floor, against the wall, back to his hand. Thump—thud—smack. The motion became monotonous, reflex, and he lost himself in the sound.

Thump—thud—smack

He felt safe down here, and couldn't reconcile the feeling. Colors were seeping in through new cracks in his world. Feelings he couldn't put images to, images he couldn't place...

Thump—thud—smack

Basileus allying with his sister had blindsided him, and it shouldn't have. He should've been expecting that his father's right hand and Herald wasn't on his side, no matter what sort of relationship they shared. And

what sort of relationship *did* they have? There was a nagging feeling, he couldn't pin it down, some part of him was *afraid* of Basileus.

THUMP-THUD-SMACK

"Are you trying to drive away what's left of my sanity?" A croaking voice came from inside the cell.

Finally. It stirred.

Cass righted the chair, nearly stumbling to his feet, peering into the dank cell. A surge of familiarity rocked him as he stood before the bars, gone before he could grasp the reason for it.

"So you have a voice," Cass said, taking in the figure huddled into a corner.

"I have many things I'd nearly forgotten." Levistus inhaled deep. "Imagine, if you will. Retaining consciousness without control of a body for hundreds of years. Even drawing in a breath is intoxicating."

Cass just scowled. He couldn't imagine, nor did he want to. The thought of his body not being his to control took his breath.

"Glasya is your sister?" Levistus unfolded himself, finally standing. "Then you must be Cassius."

He tilted his head, intently studying Cass.

"You look just like him, other than your coloring." His voice cracked. Cass wasn't sure if it was from emotion or disuse.

"I assume then, Glasya takes after her mother," Cass said, taking a cheap shot at getting a reaction.

He stepped closer to the ancient iron bars, trying to get a better view of the demon's face.

Levistus stepped into the light. He was about half a foot shorter than Cass, putting him just over six feet, his skin pale and waxen looking, his eyes fully black and sunken. He was in fact, looking like he sorely needed some good nutrition and natural light.

"I finally get to see the son of Asmodeus with my own eyes." Levistus smirked, the coldness of his expression setting off warning flags in Cass's mind.

"Where is the *God* of Sin," his tone was thick with sarcasm, "the almighty Asmodeus? Or do I not rate his personal attendance any longer?" His eyes briefly flashed, silver shining over coal black.

Cass closed his thoughts, lest they be given away by an expression.

“My father was banished to a forsaken realm when it was discovered he was making a play for more power than one being should hold.”

Levistus paused his fidgeting. “More power?” He stepped back so he could fully take Cass in. “Asmodeus gave up unfathomable power. Relinquished it when he made the decision to stay and rule the Hells instead of remaining sentinel and answering to a higher power. Your father,” a glint entered Levistus’s eyes, “had no hunger for power, son. He worships order and craves worship. Every law he’s ever written circles back to that. Now. Try again.”

Cassius swallowed hard. This demon could unravel everything Cass had done.

“You know a lot about my father and family.” He had no explanation he could give Levistus that wasn’t the truth. “And seem curiously sane for someone who's been frozen for centuries.”

Levistus chuckled hoarsely. “So that’s how this is going to be?” he shifted, moving closer, “I have a Herald. We’re telepathically linked to our Heralds—which you would know if you had one of your own.”

“Basileus…”

“Basileus is your father’s creation.” Levistus cut him off. “You’re letting him shape your leadership?” He sneered.

“I am King by my own standing.” Cassius straightened, looking down at the smaller demon. “By right of inheritance.” He put his hand against the bars, leaning in. “I hold all of my father’s power.”

“The title means nothing. A king is he that can hold his own.” Levistus leaned closer himself, they were now nearly touching. “You are a child, putting on airs.”

Cassius let a growl slip.

Levistus’s smile deepened. “You’re in need of an advisor.”

“It won’t be you.” Cass sneered back. “I’ll have someone I can trust.”

Levistus threw back his head and laughed, taking a moment to wipe his eyes. “Oh. Thank you. I’d forgotten how that felt.”

The floor trembled beneath his feet, his rising anger releasing in the form of a power surge.

Levistus reached through the bars and grabbed the front of Cass’s shirt.

“You’re looking at this from the wrong angle. Trust no one, know everything. I am not asking for your trust. I am offering my knowledge.”

“I don’t need to keep watching my back.” Cass grabbed his arm and threw it down. “I… can’t.”

Defeat washed through him, crushing his lungs from inside, settling in his gut. He’d been trying to ignore it. Instead, he’d been unknowingly feeding into it. Dwelling in self-pity.

“Now why would you allow me to see your weakness?” Levistus placed his hand on Cass’s arm. “I can feel the power you’re capable of. You’ve let them win.”

Cass bared his teeth with a hiss. “They’ve won nothing.”

Levistus growled back. “You’ve let them break you. Tell me, son, exactly how long has Basileus been shaping you? How many years? Have you ever had a chance to develop outside of his influence?”

Cass flinched, and something inside of him withered. Had he? Basileus had been his only companion for as long as he could remember. He’d introduced him to lust and the ecstasy it brought. The addiction of it…

“*They told me I’m the Prince of Lust and that’s why the women won’t leave me alone. That I have to practice control of my power or it’ll get worse.”*

“*Will you practice with me, like we do with my spells?”*

He swallowed hard at the whispers of conversations flitting through his mind. Real? More likely he was losing his mind. The Nessus was known to corrupt.

“Why would I allow you any say?” Cass kept his voice even.

“Because I’m not asking for your trust. I’ll ask for no faith from you—but I will speak fully and without deceit. Can you say the same of any you are close to?”

He was tired. Plain speaking sounded good right now.

“I’m not releasing you.” Cass sighed, exhaustion washing through him.

“I’ve been frozen without movement for a millennium. This cell, as antiquated as it may be, is luxury compared to that.”

“Then what do you expect in return?” Cass wasn’t understanding. Negotiations only worked when both parties received what they needed.

Levistus’s eyes gleamed triumphantly. “There is nothing I want more than to see that your father never returns.”

He stepped back, clasping his hands behind his back, shifting his weight from side to side.

“Your father took everything from me,” he paced, “Benzosia.” Levistus closed his eyes, clenched his hands into fists. “He waited fifty torturous years before blaming *me*. For everything that he has stolen from me, I’ll take his son for myself.”

Cass stepped back at the vehemence in his voice.

“I don’t need another father.”

Levistus’s eyes burned as they landed on Cass, and he moved back up to the bars. “Are you turning down my offer then?”

Cass pondered in silence. So many lies and games to untwist, he couldn’t grasp the common thread. Perhaps, some outside perspective would be welcome.

“I wasn’t turning it down.”

The demon smiled with evil malice. “All those who left me for dead shall be fearing my return.”

“You’re using me to further your own ends?” Disappointment leaked into his tone. He had no idea why he expected anything else.

“First lesson. Everyone is using you to their own ends. Expect it. Use it against them. Hone your strength with your wits, because boy — you’re dealing with creatures who thrive on deceit. Do not look for goodness, it holds no purchase in the Hells.”

“You’re advising me to use your agenda against you?” His head was hurting. Hell, his heart was hurting. What was left of it.

“I can be the strongest tool in your arsenal. I am full of rage. I haven’t felt sunlight in over five hundred years. I’ve had nothing to do but make lists of my enemies’ trespasses.”

“When you unleash me upon your enemies, I’ll promise you an annihilation that’ll go down in the archives of all the Nine Hells that will be spoken of in hushed tones down generations, for fear that your wrath will once again be invoked.”

Cassius felt the truth of his words, the power behind his promise. The demon was breathing hard, wrath pouring off him in waves. He took it all in, the adrenaline rush that followed a feeding of wrath invigorating his weary body.

“What…” Cass found himself breathing hard as well, “do you expect from me?”

Levistus collected himself, cool and calm façade back in place.

“To start, some food and clothing. Then all I ask is for your ear and a mind open to learning.”

Cass had to sit, his heart hammering in his chest, blood pumping hotly, the void inside him awakened and seeking more.

“Let us begin with that then,” Cass said with a nod.

22

WHAT GOOD IS A PROPHECY

Vow your unwavering loyalty to me priestess, and this prison cell will be nothing more than a memory to you.

"You've lost the sword." Domina Elmira's sultry voice broke through the fog clouding Amara's mind.

Memories were surfacing and growing persistent, as if a lid had been lifted from a box she struggled to keep tightly shut. Some of those memories were infinitely dear, some agonizing, others… devastating.

A different life, a different girl.

Compartmentalize. As long as she kept convincing herself that none of it had happened to her, she could manage.

"I didn't necessarily lose it, I know perfectly well where it is. It's the getting it back which proves troublesome."

There would be no retrieving the sword as long as the death god kept it in his possession. Not as if she could physically cross the Ether and make a demand for it.

"Really, how was I to know Namtar would simply vanish into the Ether with it? The sword was supposed to be a god killer, he should've been dead."

Domina Elmira pinned her with an incredulous stare, the set of her lips somewhere between amusement and consternation.

"If you were seeking favor from a holy sword, perhaps slaughtering the entire Ghata'n population was not the best approach? It's my

understanding that an act of genocide does not usually place one on the favorable side of justice.”

Amara’s nose scrunched up in agitation, the oracle’s words were wise, but not what she wanted to hear.

“Others may believe it done with purpose, but you know very well it was never my intention to unleash the Draugr.”

“Indeed.” Elmira’s tone held a hint of humor. “Still, you poisoned an army of hired mercenaries, then resurrected their corpses and set the ravenous creatures loose upon the capital.”

Mara’s lips twisted into humorless grin. “I’d like to think of it as an act of justice on my part. You should’ve heard the outrageous fee they demanded for their service, pure robbery.”

The mercenaries had been needlessly cruel and hopelessly inefficient. More interested in raping and pillaging that which lay beyond the city walls than in securing her sword. As the undead they had proven themselves a much more effective weapon, and highly affordable.

“There are still those who seek vengeance for the Ghata’n, and we haven’t many allies left. Not to mention the three warlords who claim to have lost relatives amongst the mercenaries you… punished.”

The threat of attack had been a constant cause for concern ever since her return. All this commotion over a useless sword she had stolen, and then lost.

“As usual we pay off the warlords. And no need for allies; those foolish enough to declare war upon Asurim will soon find themselves sharing the fate of the Ghata’n.”

She wasn’t desperate for allies, the few worth keeping were not so easily frightened off. Her eyes dipped down to follow the symbols marking her palm, the sin-eater’s sigil. The demon didn’t fear her.

Elmira’s gaze never wavered. “Sarratum-sa, I spent months plucking through the threads of fate to discover its secrets and unravel its location. As your oracle and advisor, I must warn that it is imperative the sword finds its way back into your hands.”

With a barely contained snarl Mara sunk deeper into her seat. “It didn’t work Elmira, I see no reason to spend additional time and effort knowing both the curse and Namtar remain unaffected by it.”

Her head fell back against the ornate cathedra while her gaze roamed aimlessly through the hall. Unlike the dark onyx stone of the ninth temple,

the second temple had been carved from amethyst crystal, the walls in hues of pale lavender to deepest violet. Black banners hung like columns through the open space, displaying the insignia of Asurim and its nine dominions. Each of the nine temples carried the scent of blood, but in the second it was almost lost in the aromatic smoke of frankincense and sage.

The energy within eased the tension between her eyes, and helped focus her thoughts. Along with focus came clarity and logic, enough of it to realize there was something oddly amiss with her Domina's statement.

"Elmira, the sword was brought to Gaia because its presence had been sensed within Asurim, correct? And its energy imprint was so powerful the ley-lines weren't enough to prevent Namtar from discovering its location."

With a slow roll off her shoulders Amara leaned in towards her Domina, her eyes locking with Elmira's silvery gaze.

"If our enemies and the death god managed to get a lock on the sword's imprint in such a short time, why did it take you, one of the most powerful oracles in the realms, three months to accomplish it?"

Her Domina had purposely stalled, of this she was convinced. Was she being betrayed?

"Your life depends on your next words Elmira, so I suggest you speak truthfully."

"It took me three days to discover its location, followed by three days to learn its origins, and three days to unravel its destiny."

Anger began to feed her doubts. Elmira had lied to her. In keeping information from her Elmira had caused a breach of trust, such an act carried the label of treason upon it.

"Why did you delay?"

"My visions—I didn't understand them. I wasn't sure which destiny the sword would lead you towards, Sarratum-sa. You were not sent to Ghata'n to break the curse, but to overthrow fate and help forge a new destiny for the Realms. Just as the prophecy foretold."

"You delayed me because of a children's tale?"

"Sarratum, it's not a children's tale—it's the end of times."

Amara held no faith in the prophecies that were scattered across the realms, but her oracle clearly did.

"You truly hold that much fear for a mere prophecy that you would disobey me? I asked you to find a way to break the curse, I don't give a

damn about destiny, or the realms."

"It's not fear of the prophecy which caused me to hesitate, I don't fear death. What I fear is fate, Sarratum… yours and that of our Sarrum."

Power surged, shock and anger summoning forth her magic to spark around her causing darkness expand and siphon away the light within the hall.

"The Sarrum, my *husband,* is dead. Had you paid more attention to your visions, you would've seen his red thread already severed. As for your prophecy, died along with him… you wasted my time Elmira."

She needed air, the smoke within the temple no longer calming but suffocating.

Elmira had served her loyally as oracle and Domina for the better part of a century — that had to count for something. She felt betrayed and angered, but most of all she was rattled. Cassius would have been her Sarrum, her King. She had never even stopped to think of that. They had dreamed of escaping together, in reality they could've ruled together. With him at her side surely they would have elevated Asurim into greatness.

Destiny. It had already robbed her of everything, therefore she owed it nothing.

Amara was already marching off for the portal when Elmira's voice called after her.

"Fate leads us down an infinite number of paths, Sarratum-sa. But only one of them leads to our salvation. My visions have shown the markers," her voice changed, echoing the notes of the medium.

"By a ribbon connected are the ring and the rod. Severed destinies healed through sword and cot."

"Destinies and prophecies are fairy tales, Elmira." The words left her unsettled, but made little sense. "Now find me a way to end this damned curse… you won't be given a third chance."

* * *

Elmira stared in the direction of the portal even long after it had closed. The fear she felt slowly subsiding, replaced with disbelief.

"She spared me."

"Did I not tell you she would?"

A cloaked figure approached from the shadows, the scent of sulphur and herbs betraying his identity as much as his aged voice did, yet all of these a glamour to hide his true form.

“En-Barbatos,” she lowered her head to him in reverence. “I don’t understand, she’s never shown leniency before. Yet within the span of a few days she has taken on a ward, aided the demon king and forgiven an act of disobedience.”

A small bark of laughter followed that statement. “Never is a long time oracle, and you have served the Sarratum for only a century. Did you think the sword would only restore his soul?”

Understanding dawned. “It restored her heart.”

“All this proves is that Amara isn’t a completely cold-hearted bitch. I fail to see how this proves the return of my King.” A third voice chimed in, a demon possessing the blinding beauty of his celestial brethren making his entrance inside the temple to join Elmira’s side. Mephistopheles, widely known as Lucifer, looked less than impressed with the developments.

“Better than either of you, I understand what happens to a being when their soul is displaced.” Clear azure eyes gleamed with unnatural hunger. “As soon as the boy puts together that his soul is gone, it’ll break the mind and his body will waste away. You are putting the realms in peril. The sin-eater may not be a king, but he remains our best defense against Asmodeus.”

“You doubt because you only see the shell. I’m telling you his soul is not lost to us,” Barbatos grated, “his mother…”

“Was not powerful enough to be playing games with Asmodeus. Neither of you were. And you expect me to place my faith and my forces in the hands of two broken children,” Mephistopheles said, his voice cold.

“The signs are aligned. The Sword heralds the prophecy. Either Cassius and Amara fulfill their destiny together, or the Realms will fall under the reign of Asmodeus,” Elmira said, bringing the subject back to the point.

“You may refuse to believe, Mephistopheles, but your Queen and my Sarrum are the only hope we have to overturn that destiny.”

23

I HEREBY ACCEPT YOUR APOLOGY

"My lord." Bas knelt between Cass's legs, which were sprawled out in front of him as his blank stare faced the revelry in his great hall, absorbing none of it.

The usual pit fiends, his soldiers and guards, lined the walls, lesser demons, Succubi and Erinyes in various states of undress sat at the long table, two of the beautiful demonesses dancing on top of it. Nothing out of the ordinary but his own thoughts.

"I've explained my actions. Apologized. Now will you just let me see to your needs? I can feel your hunger—it gnaws at me as well."

Bas was still fucking talking, trying to make his defection to Glasya's side more palatable.

Thoughts were spinning through his head, his entire existence in question. Had he been groomed to develop a certain way? What was it his mind was trying to tell him — and why could he not place the memories?

"Cassius." Bas placed his hands on either thigh. "Tell me you accept my apologies. I'm on my knees, in front of all, begging for your forgiveness."

Cass slowly looked down, seeing nothing but the top of Bas's platinum curls, the demon's head bowed with proper reverence. He was good at groveling. His father had taught him well. Taught them both well.

However, Cass heard the hollowness of his words, the lack of feeling behind them. They fell from his mouth with utter abandon, honeyed yet lacking flavor. Words meant nothing. Platitudes came cheap.

“If you’re truly remorseful, Bas, show me.” He needed actions. Proof that the words had meaning.

“Anything.” Bas blinked up at him, eyes the color of a pure sunlit sky.

“*I promise, one day you’ll crave this.*” Bas’s voice rose up from some fragment of a memory. “*You’ll thank me for teaching you what pleasure truly is.*”

Cass had never thanked him. Nor would he ever.

Cass pulled himself up, grasping Bas at the back of his neck to pull his face close to his own.

“Take me into your mouth. Make me come so hard I see stars.”

Feeding was necessary, setting Bas back in his place, more so.

“*Giving another pleasure is a pleasure in itself.*” The voice from the past again.

He could prove himself. How many times had Cass been made to?

Bas’s eyes darted around the hall before meeting Cass’s own. “Here? My lord? But…”

“Here, Basileus.” Cass tightened his grip. “Show them how much you worship me. Put that beautiful mouth to better use than spewing lies.”

Bas licked his lips, his throat working up and down as he sat back on his heels to work at loosening Cass’s belt.

Cass let his head fall back against his throne, trying to block out the sounds of the room. He wasn’t an exhibitionist—he merely stopped caring. He’d never thought of sex as a sacred act to begin with.

I give you my body, so two might be one.

Assat. The word kept sticking in his brain.

He shook off the intrusive thoughts.

She wasn’t real. A symptom from his diseased mind. She was merely the safe place he retreated to. *Not real*.

Bas’s tongue tentatively ran up his shaft, the trail of heat cooling, the sensation hardening him to the point of pain. Every thought in his head scattered—

Sounds of sexual pleasure were filling the room now, the scent of lust pervasive, filling all of Cass’s senses, seeping into the void that was forever a part of him. It only made him hungrier.

Bas took the head of his cock into his mouth, peeking up at him as he did, eyes searching Cass’s expression. Of which… there wasn’t one. Cass felt nothing but emptiness.

“I’m doing this for you, young Prince.” Past Bas’s voice intruded once more. *“See, there is no shame, it doesn’t matter where you perform these acts. Doesn’t matter who is watching.”*

Anger flickered in Bas’s eyes, his mouth clamping down, suction becoming deeper as he took Cass fully into his mouth, the reflexive swallowing tightening his throat around the tip of his cock.

A groan slipped out, his hands wove into Bas’s hair—the room going silent around them. There was some murmuring, a few groans of pleasure—Bas cupped his balls, squeezing them to the point of pain, and Cass moaned, his hips rocking, pushing himself deeper into Bas’s mouth.

“Does that feel good?” Bas mumbled between licks and sucks. “You like me on my knees in front of your throne?”

“*You can entreat me on your knees, Cassius. Beg sweetly and I’ll ensure your father calms down.”*

He remembered being pushed to the ground, supplication not a choice. Because his body had recently been broken due to one of his father’s ‘lessons’.

“No talking.” Cass growled, pushing Bas’s mouth back onto his cock. “Fuck me with your mouth.” He nudged his head down. “Hard, Bas.”

Bas upped his enthusiasm at the hint that Cass was becoming undone. Teeth grazed, his sucking became wet and sloppy, tongue trailing out to lick him everywhere—spreading moisture so his hand could follow, gripping the base of his shaft, pulling one way as his mouth sucked back the other.

Bas’s long slender fingers trailed from his balls, circling the tightened hole—his mind veered. Not this way, they didn’t do it this way…

“*Just relax. You’ll learn to enjoy this.”*

Bas sucked harder, pressing his finger in—*wrong.* Memories of emotions flickered just beyond reach of reality, emotions that twisted his gut.

Cass pulled Bas’s head back by his hair, his teeth scraping the entire length of Cass’s shaft, causing his orgasm to blast through him. Intense waves of pleasure that had his back bowed—spurts of semen lashing up over Bas’s face, down his chin and neck—he shook with the intensity, bellowing out a roar.

He shoved Bas back, glaring down at him as he stumbled onto his ass, wiping his sleeve across his face, expression shocked as he took in Cass’s

anger.

The lust in the room was reaching its crescendo, overwhelming Cass with an influx of power nearly as strong as a dedicated sacrifice.

His back bowed again with the ecstasy of it, groans of pleasure ripped from his chest.

When his eyes finally opened, Bas was standing over him, shirtless as he cleaned himself up, then leaned over to fix Cass back into his pants. He was so sated he could barely lift a finger, yet unease settled in his gut. A sense of wrongness. Hell, he couldn't start getting picky with how he derived sustenance.

"With my abject apologies, my lord." Bas bowed in an overblown, mocking manner before turning and stalking out of the hall.

24

UNLESS YOU HAVE A VIRGIN OR TWO TO SACRIFICE

MUCH LATER THAT EVENING, CASS WAS OCCUPYING HIMSELF, FLIPPING through his novel, his fingers absently running through Bas's hair, the demon prince settled comfortably across his chest. The pervasive guilt he felt over the 'Hall Incident', as he'd deemed it in his mind, had landed the viper back in his bed. The thought irked, but sense of guilt and the need for company prevailed.

The last thing he needed was to be left alone with his thoughts, sure they would drive him into madness one day. Already he was running low on the poisons his priestess had provided, the only thing which made these moments of solitude bearable.

"You going to read all night?" Bas mumbled sleepily.

They weren't friends, but Bas was the only link he had to his past — and for whatever reason he clung to it. He flipped the page one-handed in order to keep his hand on Bas.

"The light bothering you?" Cass replied absently, trying to keep his head in the story.

Bas's fingers trailed down his stomach. "I wanted to have some fun."

A sad euphemism Bas used to describe sexual acts.

He didn't consider it fun. It had been leaving him feeling hollow and wrong, with a sense of longing he couldn't place. Just an overwhelming urge to seek out more.

"I'm reading." Not that he needed to explain himself. It was obvious due to the book in his hand. He flipped another page, snapping it loudly.

“I found a woman for you,” Bas said, running his fingertips over Cass’s semi-erect shaft. “I know that’s your preference.”

Cass snorted softly, picking up Bas’s hand and moving it back to his belly.

“Another female of station that I can kill off for you?” Cass said, tone snide. He didn’t have the energy to decipher Bas’s games.

“Virgin. Saving herself for you.” Basileus smiled and shook his head as though Cass had just made a ridiculous joke.

“I’m not in need of sex, just lacking sleep.”

Bas cut him off by moving over him and pressing his lips to his.

With a grunt, Cass grabbed his face and held him close, delving his tongue into his mouth. It was good. Familiar and good. His cock twitched to life and he sighed in defeat, setting his book on the bedside table.

Bas’s hand gripped his now straining shaft, groaning deep in his throat.

“I’m going to get her,” he said, breath hot against Cass’s lips.

Bas left the room and with one last longing look at his book, Cass stripped off his clothes, giving himself a couple of easy strokes, trying to get his mind in the right place.

Feeding was good. Lust was the best and easiest way to do that.

Bas came back in the room ushering in a young woman. The spiny wings at her back were the only thing telling of her demon status. Erinyes. Angels of retribution—he normally stayed away from them and their notorious possessive streak.

Her body was thin and pale, her hair shining platinum locks, bringing to mind his ghost. For some reason this female brought his imaginings to the forefront. Despite his preference for curvier females, his mind had supplied a waif-thin female for his Assat.

The young female looked frightened, cowed. An unusual state for a Furie. A sick feeling gnawed low in his gut.

He was her king—her leader—and the fact of it didn’t sit well. He tossed a sheet over his now rampant erection. Her eyes followed, tongue trailing across her lips before her silver-blue eyes met his. The hunger in them matched his own.

So, she did want it. Not just another of Bas’s machinations.

He’d been so distracted with her he hadn’t noticed that Bas had also brought in another young demon, a male—though older than Cass had been when he’d started participating in orgies, that sick feeling churned.

It was his eyes. That hollow blank stare… something familiar about it.

“May I touch you my lord king?” her sweet voice whispered in his ear. She knelt on the bed beside him, hand reaching for him, but Cass’s eyes went back to the young male.

He was kissing Bas with enthusiasm, though his cock had yet to harden.

Her warm hand settled on his chest, touch soft, tentative — experimental.

Cass leaned up on an elbow, reaching out to touch her. Her skin was soft as it looked, trails of gooseflesh racing out from his teasing touches.

“You’re stunning,” he said. And she was. Up close, her pale skin shone with luminescence, wings clung close to her back, looking leathery and slick. He ran his fingers up the main arch and her head fell back, her entire body shuddering.

Why had he never indulged with any of the furies?

He met her eyes, noticing the flames burning in their depths. Like Bas’s when he was worked up — he looked over to Bas, pondering. He was on his knees, his tongue worshipping the young demon’s cock, the demon’s trembling hands resting on Bas’s head.

The Erinyes licked his chest, her hot little tongue swiping over his nipple, the pleasure of it ripping through his body. He moved his head down, taking her mouth with his, a soft kiss, her gasp of pleasure opening her mouth for more. He turned his head, deepening the kiss, leading her slow, her hands grasping his shoulders and pulling him closer.

He broke their kiss, panting, eyes roving over her body. “Can you lay on them?” He was curious about the wings, couldn’t help it.

She giggled softly. “Yes, I do prefer to sleep on my back.” She tried pulling his mouth back to hers.

“Good. I want you laying on your back, wings spread, legs wrapped around me as I take you.”

She made a mewling noise in her throat, her nipples tightening.

“My lord, you’re making me come undone with just your words.” Her eyes drifted to half-closed as she lowered herself onto her back, her knees dropping to the sides, leaving her spread open to him.

She was already red and plump—his mouth watered. “Your wings.”

“They’re very sensitive.” She blushed and turned her head to the side. “I don’t know if I can lay on them when they’re opened…”

“Please,” he whispered roughly, lowering himself between her legs.

A rough groan came from beside the bed, snagging his attention. The young demon was in the throes of his orgasm, Bas greedily sucking it down while the demon’s knees shook.

The tableau was off though. Cass had witnessed enough people in climax to note the differences—the demon’s mouth had a hard set to it, his eyes closed tightly, hands pulling Bas back…

Her hips rocked up, pressing her wet mound to his chin, teasing him with the scent of her desire.

With a rough groan he opened his mouth, sucking at her folds, tongue tracing them as they blossomed and pulsed. He looked up to see her wings furling around her sides—he had to touch—he traced his fingers across one as he suckled her throbbing clit. She screamed, panting, her back arching, hips pressing her harder against his mouth.

He plunged a finger into her sheath and she moaned low and long. She was pulsing around him, her orgasm imminent.

He got up to his knees, grabbing his cock, running the crown up and down her folds, preparing her. Her hips kept rocking against him, her wings touching his sides and he felt his own orgasm looming. Already.

He moved his hands under her ass, holding her angled up and pressed into her slowly, remaining aware that she hadn’t done this. With a keening cry, she rocked against him once more, impaling herself on him. Much faster and harder than he’d intended.

With a groan, her body tensed, her orgasm consuming her—nearly taking him along with her.

He thrust again, hard and deep and she cried out. Possibly in pain? But her legs tightened at his waist, a whole new wave of throbbing washing through her.

This time he let it suck him down. Giving into the climax, pulling out at the last moment, shooting off against her wings, his pleasure doubling at the sight of it.

Bas’s moans of pleasure broke through his haze.

He looked over to see the young demon, Bas’s cock in his mouth and tears streaming down his face.

The emotion that had been threatening surface hit him full force. His heart nearly pounding out of his chest, bile rising in his throat.

His Furie’s little sighs of pleasure weren’t even enough to distract him from it.

The blood drained from his face, dizziness swamping him. He looked away from Bas and back down at the beauty below him, his skin clammy, prickled with cold sweat. He had a moment of regret that he couldn’t continue enjoying her—but... he couldn’t.

Something was fucking wrong with him. So fucking wrong. He nearly roared with frustration at the feeling tormenting him with teasing flashes.

“Little beauty.” Cass brushed of the dewy moisture from her forehead. “I’m sorry. I can’t… I have to go.” He kissed the top of one wing then the other. “Come back tomorrow—I can’t…”

He jumped from the bed, ran into the bathroom, slamming the door before falling to his knees and emptying his stomach. Over and over. Until there was nothing left, and he was heaving and shaking over the toilet.

In a daze, he got into the shower, the scalding heat of the water pouring over him, his thoughts nothing but white noise fuzz.

Next thing he knew, the water was freezing, his body wracked with shivers. He went through the motions of drying off, pulling on clothes, putting one foot in front of the other. And again. No thought to where he was heading, his mind in a daze he couldn’t shake.

He found himself back in the dungeon, sitting in his chair, red rubber ball in his hand. Why had he wandered down into the dungeons?

Thoughts were starting to float up. Memories that wouldn’t quite form, ambiguous emotions that weren’t grounded in fact.

Bas teaching him. Showing him things. Snapping bones in his fingers. His broken body held in his embrace. *Begging him* to put an end to… what?

He spun the ball in his hand, staring down at it.

“You can toss the ball.” Levistus’s voice startled Cass from his thoughts. “I don’t mind.”

Cass stared at him a moment before blinking and staring back down at his ball.

“Or you can just sit there all creepy and silent.” Levistus shrugged and continued looking through one of the magazines Cass had sent down for him.

Cass had no words for his thoughts. No way to describe his feelings. No idea where they’d come from. No idea what was fucking real anymore.

25

YOU ONLY THINK YOU KNOW ME

AT SOME POINT, LEVISTUS HAD ABANDONED HIS MAGAZINE TO STAND AT the bars and stare down at Cass. He wasn't sure when that happened, his mind kept blanking. Levistus didn't move, didn't make a sound, those intense black eyes just watching. Waiting.

Cass didn't know how to articulate this particular issue. Hell, and he didn't even know if he had an issue. He'd never had any complaints. He'd never said anything. Why was it wrong now when it hadn't ever been?

Or had it always been wrong, and he just didn't know any different?

"*We'll escape, and you won't ever have to do that again.*" Her voice whispered up from the shadows of his mind.

Her hand reached out from the bars, touching his.

No. Not real.

He squeezed the ball in his hands, finally tossing it against the wall with a snarl of rage.

Why had he come back to the dungeon? Hoping to find compassion from his prisoner? The demon his father had imprisoned for centuries?

"*You're stronger than he is, Cassius*," her voice floated through his mind, "*don't let him touch you. You belong to me.*"

"Naga tiit, I'm yours Assat-sa," he muttered, out loud.

He tossed the ball again, surprised that his eyes burned, his throat raw…

She *wasn't real*.

He didn’t have a wife. He didn’t want a wife, and he was *never* going to give anyone so much power over him that he’d refer to them as his *reason for living.*

“*You’re the air that I breathe*,” his own voice floated through his mind, a wistful breeze of a thought.

No. He’d always been ruined. Never had a chance—he’d been shaped by his father, molded by Bas’s deceptive hands.

He took a moment to steady his breathing. Odd, but he hadn’t noticed he was out of breath. His hands were shaking. Vivid images flashed through his mind.

Of himself.

That hollow-eyed look had been familiar, because he’d seen it on himself, so many times in his own mirror.

Emotions swamped him. Feelings he hadn’t felt in… hell, that he didn’t ever remember feeling. Violated. The sanctity of his own flesh had been taken from him. Stripped away.

“So what are you going to do about it?” Levistus finally spoke, his voice low and even. Coaxing.

Cass looked up to see Levistus staring him down. Knowledge burned in his eyes, and perhaps… compassion? He knew. Somehow.

He got to his feet, his body a shaking coil of turbulent energy.

He stilled. “I can’t…” His feet moved again, walking closer to the bars, avoiding Levistus’s knowing gaze. Shame burned through him, his head lowered.

Part of him wanted to rip the still-beating heart from Bas’s chest. Envisioning it made him feel vindicated—and *raw.*

No. He shouldn’t have feelings, they shouldn’t fucking be there.

With a snarl he tossed the ball off into the blackness of the hallway. Why the fuck he ever held on to that garbage…

His hand pressed to his chest, trying to ease the tightening ache, trying to catch his fucking breath. He slid down the wall and dug his hands into his hair, trying to capture his fleeting thoughts. Grasp on to some semblance of sanity.

Maybe… he deserved nothing more. He was a demon. This was his lot in life. What he was created to be.

He slowly climbed to his feet, anger building. No—*rage.*

Basileus wasn’t going to continue making him look weak.

“So, I’ll repeat myself. What are you going to do about it?” Anger leaked into Levistus’s tone now, snapping some sense into Cass.

Annihilate his enemies. Raze them so completely they’ll speak of it in hushed tones for generations to come…

He unlocked the cell door and held it open.

“I don’t want him dead,” Cass whispered, not trusting his voice to remain steady.

Levistus reached out to touch him, then must’ve thought better of it, his hand pausing mid-air.

“Son, he deserves to be drawn and quartered and have the buzzards set upon his viscera as he watches. Your father too, for all that occurred.”

Cass turned his head, shame again washing through him, heating his cheeks.

“Don’t kill him.” Bas’s clear blue eyes came to mind, followed by a confusing mix of emotion. The thought of him dead, of no longer existing, stole his breath.

“I’ll acquiesce to your wishes this time. My Lord.” Levistus bowed his head. “But know that I am advising against letting the hell spawn live.”

“I’ll have a room readied for you,” Cass said, tone flat. “You don’t have to return here.”

Levistus’s hand rested on his shoulder, and Cass jumped back. Fuck. He was so keyed up… he had no control over his reactions.

He didn’t watch as Levistus stalked off down the hall, whistling a haunting tune. He’d just unleashed the demon that once nearly brought their race to their knees.

With an anguished roar, Cass pulled himself through to the Temple. Straight into Amara’s quarters, uncaring that he was uninvited, that he might be interrupting something, or how much it might bother her for him to intrude on her private space.

He was in need of oblivion, and she hadn’t left him extra potions.

He started rifling through vials, searching for something familiar, needing to lose himself, reset, restart, forget this ever happened.

“Sin-eater.” Amara glided into the room, sidling up to him without him even noticing. “My poisons are to be treated with respect, not as a selection off the happy hour menu.”

Cass took in a deep breath and turned to face her, his breath caught with the anticipation of her anger.

He couldn’t … he just couldn’t deal right now.

“What’s the worst you’ve got?” He tried to give her a cocky smirk, to play off his intrusion as a game, but the emotion burning through him was too powerful.

She didn’t look angry. Her expression remained neutral, but her eyes were rapidly looking him over — as though she were concerned. For him.

Now he was delusional. *More* delusional, he should say.

“You need to feed?” She pressed her hand over his rapidly beating heart, and he tensed, waiting for his body to reject her touch and betray his feelings.

Instead, her presence calmed him, his heart stopped trying to escape its confinement, his lungs filled fully, and he nearly collapsed. Adrenaline spent, he had nothing left but raw emotion that he didn’t even want to touch on.

“No. I don’t want anyone...” He swallowed hard, turning back to her collection of poisons. “I don’t want anyone touching me.”

26

THERE IS FREEDOM TO BE HAD

SHE FOUND THE SIN-EATER STANDING AMIDST THE SHADOWS OF HER resting chambers, too consumed with pillaging through her poisons to notice her arrival. In both appearance and mannerism, the hubristic veneer he wore seemed... lacking.

Something had unsettled the demon. It had been centuries since she had last seen him in such a state. Back then, the princeling had always come to her prison cell, now it appeared the king had found his way to her chambers.

His brows were knitted together, a habit of his whenever he was lost to deep thought. The glow of candlelight highlighted the streaks of gold that weaved through his hair, likely an inheritance from his mother, for Asmodeus himself had hair black as night. His feet were bare, his shirt wrinkled and untucked — unkempt and harmless looking the demon was far more dangerous to her than his usual polished elegance. He reflected too much of what she had lost, he looked too much like *him.*

To complicate matters further, their dynamics had been shifting, and still she struggled with the implications. After what transpired in his bedchamber, she wasn’t so sure she was strong enough to be a friend to the sin-eater. What were the expectations between friends anyway? She sorely lacked experience.

After moments of observation, his recklessness made it necessary for her to reveal herself, the demon either unaware or uncaring that most of

the toxins he rummaged through would prove too potent to ingest in undiluted form.

“You’ll find very little pleasure in their effects, demon.”

With care she plucked the vials from his grasp, and was surprised when the weight of his body pressed into her side.

“I thought you didn’t wish to be touched.”

His arms encircled her. “I’m making an exception.” His voice sounded small and exhausted compared to his usual tone, but he still managed to sound like a spoiled princeling.

For as lean of form as the sin-eater was, he nearly toppled her as he slumped over. His towering height throwing off her balance, while the weight of solid muscle and bone anchored her to the spot. Ideally, she’d move him to the brocade divan, getting him comfortable and warm in front of the massive fireplace, the demon was shivering.

She tried to coax him in that direction, but he stubbornly resisted, and calling for the guards posted outside her doors was simply not an option.

There was no one they could fully trust to not exploit an exposed weakness, especially not among her own greed-driven warlocks and the corrupt members of his demonarchy. That particular lesson had come at a heavy price; their future, his soul, her heart.

“Sin-eater, what’s happened?”

When he didn’t immediately answer, she eased back the tight rein on her magic ever so slightly, just enough to allow her senses to probe for the origin of his debility. A hex or curse, possibly? Perhaps the Sword of Justice had been capable of inflicting delayed damage?

As soon as her energy made contact with his, a rush of power began to bleed out, agony flowing from the demon like an opened artery.

“Hells…”

With a sharp hiss she instantly closed off, retracting her powers. She would’ve physically pulled away had she not feared dropping him to the floor by doing so. His misery and pain were awe-striking, and as soon as her magic sensed it, it latched, feeding from him like a leech.

“Damn it demon, why do you seek me out in such a state? You know how agony calls to me.”

Not many knew, mostly because her ability to feed from dark emotion was a demon trait. One she had inherited at birth, kept hidden as a child, and had rejected as an adult. The sin-eater had accidentally discovered her

ability to draw from pain; once when she had been physically starved and injured, her magic had latched on in attempt to strengthen her body.

He'd never asked about it, and she would never tell, and for over a century that unspoken arrangement had served as guideline for their collaboration. Until today...

"Take it Mara, feed and free me from this anguish."

His fingers closed around hers, returning her hand to his chest. His sigil on her palm covering her sigil above his heart, both pulsating with energy. Odd. Their rhythm seemed to match.

Energy began to flow through her, his pain calling out to her, her magic rushing to the fore, greedy for the power he offered her. "Demon."

Her low growl of warning ended in a moan as she pulled back from him, her eyes falling shut with each draw of his pain. The hurt and confusion inside of the sin-eater a toxic poison to him, and a feast to her. One couldn't blame parched lips for drinking when offered a cup of water, and she drank deeply of his offering.

The energy harvested from his pain moved through her like acid, her body burning with it before her magic consumed it, transforming it to fuel. The intensity of energy shared combined with the intimacy of the feeding made mockery of every line she had drawn between them. Pain became power, and slowly, power was turned into pleasure.

"Enough..." She couldn't withdraw, tried to unlatch her magic but it wouldn't release.

His pain kept calling to her. The more she gorged, the harder it would be to let go. It was too easy to slip, too easy to forget he was not hers. Damn him — he still tasted the same.

"Take what I offer Mara, set me free from it."

And she did, surrendering to the pleasure which built beyond her control, while held in arms where she didn't belong. The demon was a drug she had broken from, leaving the craving to forever linger.

Dizziness took hold as her pulse began to race, and a warm tingling sensation built inside her belly.

"Cass."

Instinct took over, her body obeying lessons it had been taught long ago, and pleasure became arousal. Another moan, not hers this time, as she sensed the demon latch on to her. His pain feeding her as he claimed her lust.

“That’s it…”

Heat spread between her thighs, tension building as they fed off each other, what should have been an even exchange of power. Dark gods, she was about to orgasm simply by feeding from him.

“Uhn… demon!”

Warm lips crushed against hers right as her climax hit, his mouth devouring her scream, his power enveloping her in turn, gorging on her release.

Moments passed as she struggled to break through the thick fog of pleasure. Rational thought impossible, her body too spent to move, power humming through her blood. Until slowly, reason returned.

“Oh shit.” Cracking one eye open, she became aware of the fact they’d somehow made it to her bed. The sin-eater was taking up the bulk of the space, with her sprawled atop of him.

“Shit? Beg to disagree, I rather thought the experience to have been... mutually gratifying.”

The lout had the audacity to smirk up at her right as she glared down at him.

Damnation, she had been determined to place more distance between them. Instead she carried the taste of his lips on her own, his energy searing through her, her body was pressed intimately against his—still trembling slightly from release. As far as plans went, this one had backfired in spectacular fashion.

Her senses returned, yet all were filled with him. His heartbeat filled her ears, his body heat warmed her own, his scent… her nose scrunched in distaste. How the devil had she missed that?

“You reek of Basileus.”

Slowly she lowered her face to the crook of his neck and inhaled the lingering scent which clung to him. Sex, shame, guilt… and horny female.

“Prince of Pleasures and… an Erinyes demon?”

Warmth seeped out of her, the shivers of pleasure turning to repulsion. She was an idiot, of course he’d come here straight from the harem, which was Basileus’s domain.

As if having noticed the turn of her mood, his lips moved to trail the curve of her neck, her weak spot. The caress sent a new jolt of pleasure sparking through her synapses, that odd tingling sensation in her belly returning.

“And a priestess…”

The length of her tiny claws sank deeply into the muscle of his chest. All humor and enjoyment erased, replaced by a small, sadistic thrill at the sight of his crisp white shirt blooming crimson red beneath her touch.

“Never place me in the same category as your conquests, sin-eater. I am not to be used by you.” She huffed, glaring as though her thoughts alone could inflict damage to his person.

Remember what the sin-eater is, and who he’s not…

Dominus Oberith’s words echoed through her mind, barricading her resolve. Not her demon, the sin-eater, and she would not be part of his games.

“I appreciate the pick me up, demon. But this will not become a habit between us. I won’t be used by you, so if you’ll excuse me.”

With surprising agility despite her wobbly legs, she hurried off him while pressing her nose against the folds of her robes. “I feel the sudden need for a scorching hot shower.”

The scent of sin-eater had mixed with her own upon the soft fabric, but lingering beneath it she had still been able to pick up the foul scent of corruption and sex, traces of the Prince of Pleasures and his harem. Her efforts in placing her own warlocks there to offer the demon an alternative to Basileus was clearly a failure. She should’ve expected as much.

“Take whatever poison strikes your fancy and go.”

Fuck it, those poisons wouldn’t kill the sin-eater, only leave him wishing for death. Maybe this way he’d learn to not take liberties, not with her poisons, and not with her.

Her world spun on its axis when she was roughly turned around to face him again. Her anger bristling as long fingers curled beneath her chin to lift her gaze to his.

“Are you jealous, priestess?”

“I’m nauseated, demon.”

She stiffened in his grasp, The Malsheem had trained her for the rage which always followed her insolence, her magic rising in response to her anxiety, energy crackling around them. Three hundred years in that hellhole hadn’t succeeded in tempering her pride, but it had broken part of her, and she had to fight down the urge to flinch.

The rage she expected didn’t come, instead, the sin-eater moved his thumb across her bottom lip in a gentle caress.

“It was not my intent to make you feel used. I hold you my equal in all things.”

This would not do at all. Lust and loss were wreaking mayhem within her. She wanted to punch him, to kiss him, to forget him. Moments passed, and under his gentle caress that volatile surge of magic began easing back.

“What were you looking for amongst my belongings, sin-eater?”

“I need to forget… something.”

She had always found the sin-eater’s gaze to be cold and lifeless, now its coal dark depth simply appeared haunted and hurt. And that long dead heart inside her chest gave a single, painful squeeze.

“Never ask for that. You have no idea of the damage that does to a mind. You forget the pain, but you lose yourself with it.”

“Would that be so bad? To forget and lose ourselves? We could forget together and start over.”

Damn him, and damn her too.

“Believe me demon, running away has never been an option for us.”

She stepped back, sliding the sharp tip of her claw along the length of his bloodstained shirt, peeling back the fabric to find the shallow scratches and puncture marks already healing. Good.

“Besides, you already consumed your poison rations for the week. If I am to be your dealer, then at least allow me to do so with a conscience. Let me summon the courtesans for you, feed on their lust till you are fully regenerated, perhaps then I’ll give you my poison.”

Strong arms moved around her waist, his uncharacteristically stubbly cheek brushing along her own.

“I came here thoroughly fed, and it made me sick. No concubines tonight, give me oblivion.”

She looked at her bed with dismay, not like she was going to sleep anyway. The dreams were coming to her more frequently, and what they showed her, she didn’t care to see.

“You’re sure that’s what you wish?”

“Yes.”

With a defeated sigh she shrugged off his hold on her and moved for the cabinet standing in the section of her chambers designated to her works and studies. Using her insignia ring she opened a hidden compartment, and selected a vial filled with a murky brown liquid. Pulling up two whiskey tumblers, she poured one-third of the vial’s contents into

one, topping it off with bourbon poured from a glass decanter. The second tumbler she filled with only whiskey.

“Alcohol helps dilute the toxin while decreasing absorption time. Lay down on the bed, demon, this will take effect rapidly.”

She watched him from beneath thick lashes as the demon once again spread out upon the silk and fur coverings of her bed, his form dominating the space. With him atop it, her bed appeared almost too small. Her mouth fell open at the sight of him removing his bloodied shirt, leaving her to gawk at the sculpted perfection of his broad chest and tight stomach muscles.

Again, that devilish smirk turned his lips. “I didn’t want to stain your bed…” Mischief briefly flared through those dark eyes, a vast improvement over the torment they had shown earlier. Hells, it was a vast improvement over the emptiness they would normally reflect.

She pressed the poisoned tumbler in his hands, lifting her own untainted libation in salute as she sat down upon the corner of her bed.

“Bottoms up.”

This poison would be agony to his body, but leave his mind intact. What was left of it anyway. The ruins of a former life, and of a love lost.

The trick to oblivion was not to destroy the mind, but to cause the body so much pain that mind grew still. Once the mind was quiet, a new tactile universe would open up, one where the body would grow feverishly hot, the nerves sparking alive with electricity, scents and sounds gained new depth and beauty. He had given her that pleasure earlier, she would cause him that pain now.

“Remember Cass, you are the one that asked for this.”

He burrowed deeper into the silks and furs, clearly enjoying the feel of those textures against bare skin. Feel, taste, sound, scent and color— they were all treasures Amara indulged in, remembering the centuries spent deprived. The sin-eater clearly shared her enthusiasm for these indulgences.

“You called me Cass, I like it when you say my name. Mara, stay with me?”

Again she’d slipped. She needed to leave, establish distance between them before she lost all clear view of their situation. “I can’t…”

“Sta... y.” His command interrupted by an agonized gasp.

Thirty seconds. That was all the time it took before his lungs began to seize, his nails clawing at his chest in despair as the poison spread.

Forty-Five seconds. Those dark eyes bulged out of their sockets as his body began to convulse.

"*Hells*."

With an irritated sigh she pressed herself behind him, wedging her body between his back and the headboard, crossing her arms over his chest as she pulled him into her lap, his nails scratching her as she continued to hold him closely. They'd both known she would be staying.

Sixty seconds. She was forced to release her hold when his back arched off the bed, his tormented scream filling her chamber, his voice so full of anguish it sounded as if it had been ripped free from his very soul.

Guards came barging in, only to quickly retreat at the sight of their Sarratum in her bed with the Demon King screaming at the top of his lungs. The gossip which would fill both courts by morning would surely prove entertaining.

Seventy-five seconds. He slumped back into her lap, his body going languid while heavy drops of sweat streamed down his forehead and torso, sleeking his skin. Her fingers found the soaked strands of his hair, running through the thick length

"Let go of it demon, your thoughts, your struggles. Forget for now and only feel..."

Coal-dark eyes opened to stare up at her, his gaze like a bottomless abyss. Another painful gasp, then finally the demon took a deep breath, his lungs expanding as the last remnants of tension fell from him body. The agony finally reaching a level so intense that the mind grew numb to it, all thoughts and troubles falling away as the mind focused on repressing pain — sweet oblivion.

A knock on her door had her looking up from the demon in her lap, one of the heavily gilded doors opening slowly to reveal the same warriors as earlier standing guard, while ushering a small group of males and females inside. Courtesans.

It's not him… it was time for her to leave.

"Come, assist the Demon King. Serve his needs, but only touch him should he wish it."

Four concubines entered the room, followed by their acolytes, approaching the bed while Amara herself tried to scramble off without

disturbing the sin-eater.

“No!” He turned on her with such speed that it managed to catch her off guard, his gaze wild and unfocused as he used his body to press her against the headboard.

She snarled. “Demon, release me before you do something stupid, and stop pressing on me, you are getting me all sweaty.”

“They leave, you stay. I want you to meet her, my Assat.”

She feared it was her lungs that would cease functioning, again he spoke of his wife. What exactly had she done to deserve such cruelty from the gods?

“Stay...”

Wordlessly she pointed towards the door, the concubines and acolytes bowing in reverence as they moved back towards the door in unison, quickly disappearing through it.

He arched his back off the bed as another wave of pain burned through him, his voice broken but full of command.

“Mara… stay.”

As soon as they departed, the demon eased onto his back before reclaiming his spot in her lap. Her head fell back against the cool metal headboard in defeat, focusing on the feel of the embedded protection crystals scraping lightly against her back.

“Won’t your Assat mind if she finds you in my lap?”

“Not if you care for me. Do you care for me, priestess?”

Her finger returned to move through his damp hair. “I care for nothing save for that which is mine, you should know that.” Not an answer, but neither was it a lie.

He nestled deeper into her lap before staring up at her again, his expression much too serious, his dark eyes shining feverishly as the poison worked its way through his system. This was going to be a long night.

“I’m your friend, that means I’m yours.” He nodded stubbornly, clearly satisfied by his deduction. “You care…”

She felt a smile tug the corner of her mouth, which was odd, for she felt neither happy or amused. Still, she had this moment with him, and as foolish as it was, it was also a comfort.

“You truly are more trouble than you’re worth, you know that?”

“Who said was I worth anything at all?”

She shrugged and continued to stroke his hair, the poison hadn’t nearly done its worst yet.

“Why did you send my warlocks and acolytes away? You’ll need to feed to purge this dose. Basileus will utilize that weakness to his favor.”

“No more,” he whispered, near mindless, gripping her arm as though she were a life preserver and he was drowning.

“They take my body. They get my soul.” His dark eyes found hers, sweat running profusely down his stark face.

“I don’t belong to him.”

The last words were barely audible as he slipped away into his own poison induced reality.

But she heard. And she hurt. For him, for things best forgotten. For the memories that even now threatened to pull her under.

He was broken, body and mind, vulnerable in sleep. He looked young, his eyelashes curling against his cheeks, that one lock of hair fallen between his brows.

Her fingers were pushing it back before she had made up her mind to. She traced his lips with a fingertip, up the angle of his jaw, down the column of his neck. His golden skin glistened with sweat, his left hand protectively covering his crotch, the right one reaching out as though in habit.

Reaching for someone.

She snatched her hand back in panic, could feel the treasonous wetness of tears begin to cling upon her lashes. She had thought them all spent.

“Assat-sa.” His hand reached further, grasping at air, his body becoming restless.

She couldn’t handle him awake, could not face him. Was too raw.

Carefully she picked up his hand, even in sleep his fingers shifted to slide between hers as though he had done it a hundred times.

Or for a hundred years.

“I am here vir meus, be at ease.”

As soon as the words left her, her teeth sank into her bottom lip with such force that blood began to well from her bite, stopping the flow of words spewing unheeded.

Not him. Not him. Not him.

She should knock herself out, spend the night by his side while lost to unconsciousness. She instantly dismissed the idea. The thought of being

rendered helpless too appalling and dangerous to consider.

Curiosity burned, what was the sin-eater seeing within the ruins of his broken psyche? Over the years, many had declared her brave in battle, brazen in will, and evil of character. This was true, but those strengths faltered when it came to the demon.

She wasn’t brave enough to see for herself what destruction had been wrought. Too much of a coward to face the ruins of his mind, the debris of their once future, the void where once his soul had existed, and the pieces of her once beating heart.

Instead, she let him rest, leaving the demon to meet with his ghost within oblivion, her fingers stroking through soft, damp hair as she watched over him.

27

YOU SAY NIRVANA LIKE IT'S A BAD THING

AGONY OVERWHELMED ALL HIS SENSES. HIS MIND…BREAKING. HAD TO stop fighting it…

He felt Amara's hands brushing his sweaty hair back, reassuring him. Protecting him so he could indulge in this mindlessness.

In his head, he was screaming, but what came out was more of an anguished moan. Fevered tremors wracked through his body, he felt spittle foam on his lips, choking out as his throat closed up…

Then… nothing.

The pain reached a crescendo and dragged him down into the bliss of nothingness. Escape.

"*No, only the gods lived in paradise."* He sidled up closer to the bars. *"My mother told me that all of the mortals went to Kur and ate dust."*

The girl giggled, his smile an automatic response to the sound, his heart speeding up and threatening to burst with happiness.

"*But the mortals were the source of their power, did they not realize?"*

"*Likely their hubris was the very thing that brought about their ends. No one wants to believe they have an infinity of darkness and dust to look… forward…to," his voice trailed off.* Wasn't that all her future held?

She wasn't real. This was his ghost, she belonged to his imaginings. She belonged to him.

He fought for consciousness. Not real. His mind playing tricks…

He was just dreaming of her again. He would wake up and she would be right back in the recesses of the enclosed void in his mind. The one that

things slipped out of, but he could never slip into.

His conscious mind lapsing in the grips of the poison, giving way to his dreaming mind.

“Was she beautiful Cass?” Even in his dreams, he couldn’t clearly see her face.

But her presence, as always, offered comfort. *Nothing ever felt so right as the thought of them being together, as one.*

“Was who beautiful? I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful as you, Assat-sa.”

She lightly slapped his hand, giggling at the moniker.

“Your mother?” Her hand reached out and ran down the side of his jaw. “I think she must’ve looked like you.”

He smiled, catching up her hand and kissing the tip of each finger, searching for words to describe his mother.

“To me she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Her hair was like sunlight through black silk and her eyes matched. Gold shining through darkness.” Much like his, he supposed. “And she used to sing to me.”

“She... sang?” She tilted her head, contemplating.

It struck him then, that perhaps she’d never heard music.

Even in the depths of his father’s Hells, he got to enjoy that much.

“I’ll be right back.” He pulled her close to the bars, their lips close, too far away, he kissed his own fingers and pressed them against her mouth.

He tracked down Az to tell him what he was looking for, just one person who could sing, play an instrument, anything…

His heart raced in anticipation, return to her. She is waiting. He nearly dropped his bundle to reach out for her.

“Az sent you new clothes and such.” He shoved the bundle through the bars, one item at a time, dropping the underwear on the floor, his face heating.

He’d seen many women unclothed, in their undergarments—none of them could compare—none of them were her.

“Turn your back so I can bathe.” She smiled wickedly over her shoulder, a fleeting glimpse of a face he couldn’t focus on, but he knew it. She was perfection.

She was already stripping down.

Her body was thin, but perfectly formed. He couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to hold her… he yearned…

"By the gods, I need to touch you." He watched her until she was completely naked, then turned. There was only so much he could torment himself.

He banged his head back lightly, trying to shake the image of water slicked skin and rivulets trailing across places he could only dream of touching.

He heard steps moving toward them and stood, blocking as much of the view of her cell that he could. When Az appeared, he let out a sigh of relief. He had a timid lady and frail looking man behind him, the male carrying a viola that looked as ancient as he.

Sometimes souls were left whole, especially if they entertained enough.

He held up his hand to let Az know that she wasn't ready, then felt her hands slide up the back of his shirt, icy cold because of the water. With a hiss, his body stiffened, and he turned to glare at her.

"Little imp," he said, smiling and holding his hand to her face. "Now sit with me, I have a surprise."

"Is it a new book?" Her smile widened.

"Not this time," he picked up her hand and tugged her down with him, "just hold my hand and listen."

When the first haunting chords cried out from the instrument, he heard her gasp. When the music was joined by the lady's voice, he swore he heard the notes of paradise itself. She began openly weeping, her hand tight around his.

"I didn't know something so beautiful existed," she whispered to him when their song ended.

"you exist," he said, turning to her fully. "I think the way you make me feel is the most beautiful thing that's ever existed."

Her smile was blinding as she shook off his hold. *"Cassius,"* she whispered on a hushed breath.

He would forever remember the way his name sounded on her lips.

His mind surfaced from the dream, fighting off the poison.

She was still here, haunting his mind, her lips hovering close to his, her scent achingly familiar, tinged with the scent of whiskey. He wanted to see her face. He could never focus on it, like his mind balked and skirted over details.

“I’m yours.” He leaned his head up to follow her mouth, needing more, his body too weak to fight out of her hold.

“Are you really here? I’m dreaming. Always of you…” he murmured against her lips, pressing hurried kisses to her mouth.

“Well stop. Save your heart for someone worthy.”

His mind fought against the poison. Those words weren’t right. She was all that was sweet.

“Take it. I don’t want it.” He clawed at his chest, the agony of it nothing compared to what it was going to be once she left him again.

He felt himself shaking off the poison, fighting to cling to this dream — to her.

“Cassius,” she cried out, grabbing his face and pressing her cheek to his, speaking directly into his ear.

“Stop hurting yourself. Please,” she cried out the last.

“You’ll always have my heart, demon. It’ll help keep yours safe.” Her voice lowered to a whisper, the tremble in it making him want to wrap his arms around her and never let go.

“I don’t deserve that.”

How could he offer himself when it meant nothing? There was nothing special left of himself. Nothing he could give her that thousands hadn’t had before.

“Assat-sa, I have nothing you want.”

He woke slowly, then came to his senses all at once. She was gone.

He was truly going mad. But part of him felt… eased. Wanted. Dare he say— *loved*. If he focused hard enough, he could still feel lingering traces of her in his mind.

He lay in a sweaty heap, half across Amara, the priestess passed out with exhaustion. Because she’d diligently watched over him as he indulged in his addiction. Somehow her presence had called up the vivid dreams to his mind, through her poison, or her connection to the ether? Either way, she’d clearly worn herself to exhaustion with it.

He eased their tangled limbs apart, running his hands down his face.

Amara had given him a gift he could never repay. Nothing he could do would ever make up for this—feeling of contentment—she’d given him. He sat up on the bed, tucking the covers up around her, pondered curling up beside her to catch some more sleep himself, when he felt a voice reverberate through his mind.

Someone was calling for him and using the Celestial Voice of Power. And he was just curious enough to go investigate.

28

SHEPHERD TO THE FALLEN

HE SLIPPED THROUGH ASURIM'S PORTAL, FOLLOWING THE CALL OF THE voice, coming through in a field that stretched to craggy cliffs that dropped into the ocean, the suffocating ley-lines telling him he was on the Mortal Plane. He hadn't known what to expect, he'd only held rulership of the Hells for the past five years, he'd never had any personal dealings with an angel before. Cass himself had never rated their attention.

The celestial stood with his legs braced, sword held across his well-muscled body in a battle stance. He stood with the sun to his back, lighting up his golden hair and putting his facial features in shadow, lit up eerily from the glow of his flaming sword.

He looked longingly at the Angel's sword. He'd heard stories, never set eyes on one, they were specifically forged to mete out divine retribution. Had he been called here to meet his end?

"Cassius," the Angel said, sheathing that lovely sword and offering a nod.

Guess he wasn't going to die today.

The angel held his hand out with an assured cockiness that had Cass mystified. He reached out his hand back, unsure of what to expect, and was flooded with a wave of serenity when their hands touched.

It nearly brought him to his knees.

Was that what peace and stillness felt like in a soul?

The Angel pulled his hand back, shaking it, a grimace on his beautiful face. Cass took note of that—and the panic in his eyes.

“You can call me Sid.” The angel—*Sid* said, averting his eyes and stepping aside to reveal another.

Their hair was close to the same color, their builds equally large, but that’s where the similarities ended. This one had twining black marks swirling across his naked body, covered only by iridescent black wings—much like his father’s.

Cass took a staggered step forward.

“He’s… fallen?” Cass turned to face Sid. There hadn’t been an angel that fell—not in his lifetime.

“You have to take him to the Nessus,” Sid said, eyes darting frantically. “They’re coming. They expect me to strip his wings, to end him—and I won’t.” Sid straightened and crossed his arms over his chest, moving fully out of Cass’s way.

“I was given your name with assurance he’d be safe with you.”

Cass’s brows scrunched together. Who in their right mind thought he’d be a good example of responsibility?

“Who?” Cass looked between the two angels.

“Azadiel.” Sid waved his hand. “Don’t ask, there’s a family connection from way back.”

Cass wasn’t going to ask about the connection, but it *had* been on the tip of his tongue to ask where he’d found Azadiel. The demon owed no fealty in the Hells, Cass hadn’t seen him since he’d pushed him to make an alliance with his priestess. He obviously thought Cass was up to the task of taking in stray angels.

“Promise me you’ll see him safe.” Sid was alert, constantly scanning the skies.

Cass couldn’t help but stare. The newly fallen angel was hunched with defeat, the grief pouring off him a palpable thing.

“What are you offering in return for this favor?” Cass arched a brow.

“I really don’t have time to negotiate,” Sid said, twitchy and looking over his shoulders, “I’ll owe you a favor, within reasonable parameters in the future, King Cassius.”

He nodded, liking Sid just for the fact he’d used his title.

He stepped past Sid and helped the dark angel to his feet, that same soothing peace washing over him as they touched.

“His name is Jez’Piel,” Sid said, his head hung, “and he was my friend.”

Cass swallowed hard, moving his arm under the fallen's, helping to prop him to his feet. He stood a few inches shorter, but was built larger than Cass, battle hardened muscle and well toned bulk.

"I'll do what I can," Cass said, wincing when he felt the reverberation in the air. Celestials were closing in, he felt it in his bones.

"Leave me," Sid cried out, pushing at Cass and taking a few stumbling steps back.

He pulled the angel through the open portal, into his own bedroom, easing him onto the bed. Questions wouldn't do. He had no answers. He wasn't sure how this sort of thing was usually handled. Couldn't be very often an angel fell from grace.

His burnished gold hair was long enough to completely obscure his face, all Cass could see was bulky muscles covered in odd twining sigils.

"Are you going to bring me to Azadiel's realm?" the angel muttered.

Azadiel's *realm*? He hadn't seen that particular demon in at least a century, and knew less than nothing about him. Memory struck, his head starting to ache. Hadn't Azadiel been there, in his dream, with his ghost?

"*We promise to behave, Az. It's not like we can reach to touch each other inappropriately." He was trying to be serious and responsible, but her unheeded giggles broke him, his face cracking into a grin, then a snicker escaped.*

"*And I'll trust you at your word when the two of you learn to respect the gravity of this entire situation," Azadiel spoke, his angelic features solemn.*

Cass shook off the memory, annoyed at the teasing fragments.

"Look. Jez'Piel? Jez? I'm gonna call you Jez." He went to his closet, grabbing up some clothes, thinking twice about the shirt. How would he get it on over those wings? They were massive. Probably close to twenty feet across if they were spread out, he tried picturing it in his mind.

"I have one fuck of a headache, I haven't slept much, I'm still working through my last poisoning," Cass continued, tossing pants at Jez who thanked him with what amounted to a grunt. "Pull yourself together and put some clothes on."

The angel's head snapped up, and he finally got a good look at his features; sharply hewn, every angle set perfectly against the other — molded by divine hand. His eyes were the color of an inland lake, a penetrating shade of blue-green, beautiful even when filled with disgust.

Cass turned his head, trying not to let it get to him

"You're enjoying this," Jez said, his tone cold. "How amusing to see an angel lose his grace and ties to everything he's known, is that it?"

No. Cass was watching him pull up his jogging pants, the ripple of his abdominal muscles as he eased them over his ass. He preferred women, was currently fixated on one in particular, but historically speaking, his bed had always been filled with a male.

Jez was far larger than Bas, larger than any male Cass had brought to his bed—but equally as beautiful. Hells. He was missing Basileus. His chest was a raw ache that the demon used to fill.

Or that might be the sharp sting of betrayal.

"You can rest here," Cass said, sitting beside him on the bed.

Jez scoffed, inching away. "You think I don't know what you are, lord of sin? Prince of Lust, able to seduce any being whether they would care to be or not."

Something inside of him shriveled. He *had* used it as a weapon, couldn't deny it. The judgment—*disgust*—in Jez's eyes made him feel lesser for it. As though he didn't deserve to breathe the same air as someone so fundamentally good.

"*Your power does dark things, but you're far more than just your power. Besides, I love that you are scarier than the worst of the monsters here.*"

Someone at some point had thought him worthy of love.

"Are your hands so clean you think to judge me, holy boy?" Cass finally answered, sneering at the angel. "You're not making me feel very sympathetic to your situation."

Jez dropped his head. "I wouldn't dare," he whispered. "Obviously I'm now irredeemable myself, or I wouldn't be here." He finally looked around the room, his eyes widening briefly at the sight of all the books. "In hell's library?"

Cass's brow furrowed. "Maybe once. I've moved the fortress to suit my needs, now it's my bedchamber and private suites."

The angel moaned low, dropping his face into his hands. "What have I become?"

There was nothing Cass could say to comfort him, he understood the flux the angel was in and knew there was no reassurance when your world

cracked open beneath your feet. His own angst matched the angel's, seeking commiseration.

"May I…" Cass leaned closer, the urge to comfort the angel oddly strong. "Touch your wings?" His father used to backhand him for even trying.

Jez's head jerked back, his eyes blinked. "Yes?"

He traced a feather with a fingertip, then rubbed it between finger and thumb, awed. Jez let out a long breath, and Cass felt a hit of lust. His breath caught, and he pulled his hand back.

"Apologies." Cass grasped his hands together. "I didn't mean it like that."

Jez's face shaded to bright red. "No. it's okay. Run your hand down it if you'd like." He looked over his shoulder at his own wings. "They're so… dark now."

Cass's hand shook as he ran it down the incredible softness, Jez swallowing audibly.

"It feels nice," Jez said, his body relaxing, then he lay back, Cass continuing to stroke the wing that was arched to cover his chest. He couldn't help himself.

They were of a like situation, the two of them sunk beyond their depth.

"Is this where you corrupt me, Lord of Sin?" Jez said, jaw clenched.

Cass shook his head sadly. "Perhaps this is where you heal me."

The angel oozed peace and serenity, a balm to his aching body and turbulent mind.

Jez flinched back when Cass's hand accidentally grazed his side. He was so physically exhausted he'd given no thought to seducing the angel, but Jez looked at him warily… and with fear. A sharp reminder of just who Cass was. A demon. Not to be trusted.

"*Sleep with one eye open in the viper's pit…*"

"I wouldn't…" He cleared his throat. "I would never touch you against your will."

At that, the angel's face crumpled into despair, wide tracks of tears falling freely down his cheeks.

"I have a will of my own," Jez said quietly.

Cass almost smiled. The thought of being upset that no one controlled your will anymore plainly absurd. But not. Had he ever truly been his own man? He'd been manipulated, shaped and used as a pawn for all of his

memory. And here he was, regretting sentencing his lover who had betrayed him in more ways than he could fully remember.

Cass felt a shift in his energy, something inside of him latching onto the energies the angel was emanating.

Jez swiped at his face. “I feel your pain. Like an erosion of the pit of your soul. What pains you like this? Is it because you’re demon born?” His words were soft, wondrous. Curious.

Better than his condescension.

“It’s not singular to demons, if that is what you’re asking,” Cass said, his chest beginning to ache, only to be soothed once more.

There was a brisk knock at the door and Cass jumped to his feet, hastily pulling the curtains closed around his bed before opening the door.

Levistus moved past him and walked right into his bedroom, Cass shutting the door behind him. His chest tightened right back up, a tangle of mixed emotions clouding over the peace.

“It is done, my Lord.” Levistus’s gleaming eyes turned to him.

His bed creaked from the angel shifting around, a ruffling of feathers apparent. Levistus’s eyes shot over to the bed, body tense with shock.

“What,” Cass’s voice cracked. “What did you do?”

Levistus narrowed his eyes on him. “What did *you* do?”

Cass stepped back from the blackness seeping out of the other demon. Then stopped, pulling himself together. Yes. He was young. But he was powerful in his own right. He straightened, narrowing his eyes right back.

Levistus sighed, shaking his head. “I’ve bound Basileus to the mortal realm. He’ll forever be barred from entering the Hells, portals are now beyond him.”

Cass froze, feeling the blood drain from his face.

His refuge.

Forever tainted — he would never be able to go there without looking over his shoulder. Never be able to bask in the sun or walk the coast of Normandy…

“Though I would’ve preferred giving him over to the Erinyes, he was born of one and would have been treated with deference.” Levistus continued talking, not realizing that Cass’s life had just finished shattering.

That was the only place he had left to run to.

He was wielding a double-edged sword in Levistus. So long as he held the handle…

The demon moved closer, touching Cass's arm. "You're looking much better today."

Cass nodded, still unable to catch his breath.

"Next time you go to that realm, I'll join you." Levistus kept fishing, trying to find the sore spot.

"Yes," Cass said, meeting his gaze.

"I have connections that have been waiting to hear from me for many long years." Levistus nodded, giving Cass's arm a brisk rub.

He turned and stared at Cass's bed for a long moment, mumbling under his breath "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers—"

Cass moved between Levistus and the bed. He wasn't going to let anyone steal that peace from him. Not now.

"Be aware of what you are getting yourself into, Cassius," Levistus said, using his name for the first time. "There are some enemies that are beyond even you."

Cassius nodded and breathed a sigh of relief when Levistus left the room.

He crawled back into bed beside the angel and closed his eyes, wallowing in serenity.

29

SOMEONE HAS TO DO IT

SHE WAS GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS WHILE LOST IN A TRANCE, REMOVED from the sights and sounds which preceded death. The familiar swish of her blade, the dripping of blood down the altar to pool at her feet, that final gasp of breath.

Most of the ancient deities demanded their tributes in blood and suffering. Their power derived from those final moments in which her victims cried out to the gods for mercy. It was no use. Their suffering great and their deaths violent, for in their greed the gods knew no mercy.

It is why she closed off. Dissociation. It wasn't her committing these vile acts, it wasn't she who was causing such suffering, it wasn't her who once suffered similarly for no other reason than it brought others joy. At least these poor fools had been offered death in the end.

Another life, a different girl...

Blessedly, her final sacrifice of the night had been different, not one offered to the ancient gods, but to the Nessus. This life had been sacrificed in the name of the King of Hell, Cassius. And in his name, Amara could afford to be merciful.

She had selected this sacrifice with care, had ordered her bathed with the finest oils and groomed by her personal attendants. The woman had spent the night embraced in the arms of worshippers, had been loved and cared for without corrupting her innocence. And finally, she had been given laced wine to drink, her cup filled until her mind was consumed by drug-induced euphoria, and her body rendered numb to the cut of her

blade. No fear, no pain. The only mercy she was capable to give to one whose soul she had just condemned for eternity.

“The Nessus was weakened beyond expectation, it seems he has not been feeding regularly at all. Stubborn demon.”

Amara’s eyes opened slowly when she could finally release her connection to the Nessus, her gaze locking with the sightless eyes of her latest victim. The female had been younger than her, a white witch not even frozen into her immortality yet. She had been innocent, pure and brimming with life.

And Amara had just fed her soul to the Hells, where it would be consumed by corruption until nothing of that purity and innocence remained. She had destroyed her, for him.

The familiar weight of ceremonial robes settled over her shoulders, covering her bared and dampened skin.

“She made for a worthy sacrifice Sarratum.”

A humorless smile curled Amara’s lips at the sounds of Elmira’s husky voice, sure that her oracle sensed the growing melancholy within her. Her crimson tinted fingers brushed over the eyelids of the dead woman, closing those large grey eyes a final time.

“And still Hell demands more, its hunger grows by the day…” The corruption was an endless void, and as greedy and unyielding as she knew its king to be.

Her muscles ached, her head thrummed. From dusk till dawn lives had been surrendered to her blade, blood had been spilled, souls had been offered, energy had been exchanged. The apex of the blood moon was celebrated throughout all of Asurim and each of the nine temples with the spilling of blood. Much divine energy had been harvested, its power would help strengthen the essence of Asurim, recharge its magic and heal their dying realm. *But for how long?*

Experience ensured she didn’t lose her footing on the slippery stone as she effortlessly descended the steep stairs, her bared feet and the hem of her robes ended up coated in spilled life’s blood by the time she reached the bottom. The sea of worshippers spread apart before her, and she wasted not a moment in her hurry to escape the stifling hall. As much as she craved the solitude of her chambers and the comfort of a warm bath, there was work to be done yet.

“Sarratum-sa, there is someone here to see you.”

Er-Agate's voice stopped Amara in her tracks, turning to her. Her attendant knew not to intrude when she was heading towards the inner sanctum unless it was urgent.

“Yes?”

The form standing behind her had Amara momentarily come up short. The last time she had seen the Fae was over half a century ago, and their encounter had placed the woman in large debt with her. It was the Dark King’s sister, and bride to the Blood Lord, who had come seeking an audience.

“Alura, how surprising to find you returned to Asurim after so many years. Has my spell been broken?”

“No, Jareth remains unaware, and you promised…”

With a wave of her of her hand Amara silenced her. “Yes, yes, I gave you my vow. The Blood Lord won’t learn from me that it’s dark magic which keeps him from succumbing to the blood lust. A pity the vampire will never know how much he owes to you.”

“I’d give everything to save him...”

“If I recall your vow to me correctly, you already did.”

At the reminder of the price she had been made to pay Alura paled, which made Amara grin. A sadistic little habit she couldn’t be bothered to break.

“I am guessing you didn’t come here to enjoy tonight’s show.”

The ghostly pale turned a light shade of green, one which had Agate take a rather large a step to the side with a grimace.

“Was all that really necessary?”

Amara closed the distance between them in two steps, coming face to face with the ill looking female. “I only do things for two reasons, either they are necessary, or they amuse me.”

Enjoying the fear she felt radiating from her guest, Amara let the tip of a claw run down the marble-like curve of Alura’s neck.

“I’ll let you judge which of the two guided my actions tonight.”

To her surprise the Fae’s eyes flared crimson, and small fangs protruded out as she hissed. The Fae had been turned, interesting.

“You will not intimidate me, Amara.”

Her own grin turned into a smile at the challenge in Alura’s gaze, she enjoyed goading the timid ones out of their shells.

“You won’t? Well there goes my fun, and since I fail to see the necessity of this conversation… goodbye, Alura.”

She had already turned her back on her unexpected guest, all she wanted was to finish her task at the inner sanctum and bathe. She felt...filthy.

“It’s Gwynn.”

Within the next heartbeat her fingers closed around Alura’s wrist, bath forgotten. Instead of heading towards the inner sanctum she was already pulling the Fae along, towards the portal which would take them to Tir Na Nog.

“What happened?”

“He led the Wild Hunt during the blood moon.”

Not ten minutes later they were within the throne room of the dark king’s castle, standing amongst the crowd of Fae warily circling their crazed king.

Darkness moved over Gwynn, shadows to everyone else, but voices and entities to the Dark King. Darkness was speaking to him, and he listened, and the longer he listened, the closer they lured him into the abyss of madness.

Any who dared enter that circle got swung at by the scythe he carried upon him. But it wasn’t the swinging blade that held Amara’s attention, it was the fact that Gwynn was wearing nothing but his good looks as he was doing so.

“Aren’t you going to *do* something?” Alura’s tone sounded as if she was close to panic.

“Hmm...” Each swing of the scythe caused those firm muscles of his to ripple and flex. “Do something about what?”

“Amara!”

“Oh right… By the way, that’s a lovely perfume you wear Alura.”

“Thank you, wait—what? What are you up to?”

She was already shoving her way through the crowd to the edge of the circle.

“Me? Nothing. Can’t I just give a compliment to be… nice?”

“You? No.”

She heard Alura’s scoff right as she set foot within the circle. Dodging the first swing as it whooshed by.

She winked at the flustered Alura, before turning her back on her, needing all her focus to deal with the crazed Fae King with the deadly scythe.

Darkness and she were old friends, she had long ago welcomed it into her soul and it knew her, when she called, it answered.

Power brushed along her senses, then latched to her magic as if to feed from it, just like it had in Ghata'n. It had been the darkness inside of her which had caused her magic to summon forth the Draugr then, now she used it to summon for Gwynn, hoping she hadn't been too late.

Carefully she stepped deeper into the circle, her eyes never leaving that swinging scythe, she was within range now and its sharp blade was more than capable of lopping off her head in a single slice.

Another hesitant step as she allowed more of her magic to flow from her, more darkness latched—the scythe stopped swinging.

Another step would place her before him, where the Dark King would either welcome her or strike her down.

"Asbu sa?"

Eyes the color of a golden supernova blinked, then opened to a flash of crystalline blue.

"Mo' stór?"

She took that last step without further hesitation a relieved smile curling her lips as she let her finger trail down the blue markings across his jaw.

"Hey tall, dark and crazy, we have a problem. One of us is underdressed and causing a scene, and for once, it isn't me…"

30

UPPING THE ANTE

THE CACOPHONOUS RACKET OF HIS THRONE ROOM WAS GOING TO PUSH HIM to the brink of insanity. Demon representatives from all the realms clamored about, talking over one another, shouting to make themselves heard.

Word had gotten out about Levistus's release and Basileus's exile.

Anger was simmering to a boil within him.

They dared not accuse him of anything directly. Ironically, he had Amara to thank for that. Being gutted with the Holy Sword *had* given Cass an air of reverence. Not many would've survived such a wound.

They crowded the bottom steps of his dais, red-faced and speaking among themselves, growing louder, words turning to actions as shoving matches broke out. He stood, walking to the edge of the dais, meeting the eyes of a few of the more vocal demons.

The Herald of the Second approached his throne, belligerence written all over his reddened face.

Cass stood, the floor trembling under his feet, the Herald's steps faltering.

"SILENCE," Levistus shouted across the room.

And then there was silence.

Cass resumed his seat, offering Levistus a grin. The demon sat to his right, the seat that was reserved for his Herald, Jez sitting in front of him on the top step of the dais, in a silent state of confusion.

“You know,” Cass said, low enough so just Levistus could hear, “I am in need of a Herald.”

Every Arch-Deacon had one of their own, a Herald to be their voice when they were unavailable, a right-hand to help them rule their respective realm. It was an oddity that he, as high-ruler over all, hadn’t assigned his own.

Levistus scoffed. “Don’t look to me, son. I’ll act as advisor, I won’t be set under thumb.”

Cass nodded, leaving that thought to ponder at a later time.

“I’ve come to address your concerns,” he spoke loudly, leaning forward in his uncomfortable throne. “I’ll address them all, with four words.”

“I. AM. YOUR. KING,” he shouted, releasing the rage that had been building.

“You are a child!” One of the Heralds shouted back. “You expect us to show allegiance, yet you’ve done nothing to prove yourself and have unleashed a beast that cannot be controlled.” The demon’s eyes shot over to Levistus then back to Cass.

“Does he need to be controlled?” Cassius spoke softly, venom in his tone.

“You’ve banished Basileus,” another demon spoke up, stepping up beside the other. “What are his alleged crimes? Do you banish us now at your whim?”

Cass glared him down. “His trespasses were personal. I do not answer to you.”

“Who do you answer to then?” The first Herald stood straighter, his chest puffed up.

“I answer to the Nine Hells themselves. The Nessus is mine, in my blood. You dare to question this?”

The Herald sneered. “A boy. With unproven powers.” He turned back to address the crowd and Cass let out a growl.

“You will offer me allegiance or be banished to the pits,” Cass said, jaw clenched.

“Oho. And you would toss us all in the pits?” The Herald turned back. “Who would grovel at your feet when your halls are emptied?”

A wave of dizziness washed over him. The walls of the throne room trembled around him, an influx of power hit—so massive it nearly toppled

him. He opened his hands, letting them fall to his sides as he took it all in, surges of it, more than he got from feeding directly.

Amara. He smiled to himself, even as the demons loitering in his throne room shouted and scrambled and fought to stay on their feet.

The priestess did something. Blood moon, sacrifices, the timing couldn't have been better.

The ever-present gnawing of hunger inside of him appeased, every cell in his body flooded with the power of it.

Jez stood at his side, tapping his face.

"Your eyes are glowing," the angel whispered with awe.

Cass grasped his hand in his, nodding before turning back to the room. The angel groaned, his body shuddering. Their essences twined once more, the power influx evening out between them at the physical touch. For the length of a breath, they were one.

One. With a celestial.

A whim of a thought began to percolate. An idea...

"Are there any who question the power of their King?" Levistus paced in front of him, speaking to the chaotic assembly. "Any who doubt he is as powerful as his sire?"

There were a lot of noises of dissent, grumbles and hushed whispers.

"Then drop to a knee and accept your King. Trust when I say you want to remain in his good graces," Levistus said, then turned back to Cass, dropped a hand to his shoulder, and with a quick squeeze stepped back behind him.

Like a wave, the assembled demons dropped to their knees amid the rubble now strewn about the hall.

"Allow me to present my Herald," Cass spoke clearly, voice trembling with power, "Jez'Piel, former Power, executioner for the Celestials, now Voice of the Hells."

At his proclamation, Cass felt the power flare between them, the beginnings of their bonds solidifying into something more.

Jez gasped loudly, trying to pull his hand from Cass's, Cass just held it tighter, giving a reassuring squeeze.

"Feel free to continue your feasting," Cass said, then pulled Jez from the throne room, Levistus swiftly following.

"By the hells boy, what do you think you're doing?" Levistus hissed in his ear.

Cass stopped and opened the door to his room, ushering them both in.

“We’ve formed a bond.” Cass shrugged. “It wasn’t my intention, but I intend to make use of it.”

Jez dropped to the chaise, burying his face in his hands with a broken sob.

“You flirt with the wrath of the Celestial Triad,” Levistus said, pacing to the window.

It hadn’t been his first choice either—to bond with a celestial. He would have been better off with someone who had political connections, at least knowledge. He dropped to the seat beside Jez, pulling his wing over his lap and absently stroking it while he considered Levistus’ words.

“Perhaps they should worry more about provoking mine.”

He looked up and met Levistus’ eyes, knowing his own were still glowing with power. It throbbed through him. Bliss. Ecstasy.

Levistus knelt in front of the angel. “Do you understand what it means to be Herald to the First?”

Jez finally looked up, eyes puffy with unshed tears. “I am to be forever mind-linked with the King of Hell. I am to be his voice to dictate his orders, his diplomat when it comes to negotiating between races,” Jez gave Cass a lingering look. “It means I’ll never redeem my grace. I am outcast and Fallen and fallen to the lowest depths.”

Cass growled. “It means,” he lowered his voice, “that you are now the second highest being in these realms. That you are answerable only to me. That you have freedom. Your celestial brothers wouldn’t dare to seek trouble with the Herald to the King of the Hells.”

Jez hung his head, and Cass felt the agony seeping out of him.

Levistus stood, looking down at them both. “Don’t think of it in terms of being lowered, Jez’Piel.” Levistus slipped his shirt over his head and wings appeared, larger and darker than Jez’s. “We are merely opposite ends of the spectrum. Balance.”

Jez stared up at him, in wondrous silence.

Cass looked between the two of them. “How come I don’t have wings?”

31

OF ALL THE BOTHERSOME TIMING

"OH… RIGHT THERE!"

Clever fingers moved up her inner thigh while his tongue worked to rob her of all her senses.

"Gwynn!"

"One more time A' Stór, scream my name one more time, and I'll allow you to come."

"You high handed, lousy excuse of a... Ahh!"

The deep rumble of stifled laughter rose up from between her legs. "Endearments don't count, try again."

His teeth scraped along the swollen bud of her clit, forcing her back to arch, but releasing too quickly to push her over the edge. He had worked her body up until she felt like a tightly wrapped coil, and the tricksy fae clearly derived pleasure by keeping her there. She struggled to keep heavy eyes open, not wanting to give up the delectable sight of him as he languidly moved his fist to work his own rigid flesh.

An intrusive tug at her senses had all pleasure fade to the back, a rising sense of distress taking hold instead.

"Oh, please no..."

"*Amara of Asurim, high priestess of the ancients, Queen of the warlocks. I summon you."*

Sensing the energy shift Gwynn stopped, his strong fingers closing around her wrist instead as he pulled her into his chest.

"Fight if off A' Stór, you can do this."

The compulsion rang through her, emerging from inside her mind before latching onto very her soul. An ancient magic ruled by the law of creation, forcing those with even a drop of demon blood in their veins to obey the call when summoned for by name. Her warlock side gave her some resistance to the compulsion, but not enough to against the more powerful calls.

The hold of this summons was too strong to break, even with all her wards and protections in place.

“Gwynn, I can’t…”

A portal was already opening at her side, the vacuum gaining strength, drawing her in. She could feel the moisture of her skin evaporate as she continued to resist its pull, her mouth going dry as she stared into its void.

“I don’t even recognize the imprint. Gwynn, I don’t know where I’m being summoned to.”

Distress quickly turned to panic. Ever since she had been six years old, since she had been tossed into that portal which had led to her captivity — each summons had turned into a terror filled event. Somehow, she’d managed to keep this weakness a secret from most, but Gwynn often suffered visions, and had understood her quirks without her ever needing to open up. He knew she couldn’t.

A different girl, a different demon...another life.

“It matters not where you go, you can handle what awaits you on the other side.” The silk of clean robes was draped over her shoulders. The same fingers which moments ago had pushed her to the limit of her senses moving quickly to clasp a silver belt around her waist, securing her modesty while providing her with a weapon, her athame.

“Breathe A’ Stór, if you’re not returned to my side in two days I’ll come searching.”

She fought for control over her breathing, too scared to be embarrassed by her own cowardice.

“Gwynn…” She couldn’t hold back for very much longer. “Don’t forget about me.”

Crystalline blue eyes blazed golden for a brief instant, not a promising sign towards his lasting mental stability. He was going to forget her. She heard him mumble something about fate, the roar of the portal too loud for her to make out all the words, in the next moment the void closed in around her, and she fell.

After what felt like an eternity of plummeting aimlessly through the cold and empty space, a flash of pale light assaulted her eyes. Then the air was pushed out of her lungs as she crash-landed onto dark, rich soil. Gaia. She recognized that pale moonlight, that earthy scent, and the drain of the ley-lines.

As soon as her legs would obey, she pushed herself off the ground, wiping dirt and grass from her robes. Not the impressive entrance one would hope to make, but at least she had managed not to spill her stomach contents during the journey this time.

A luminescent gold energy surrounded her, the barrier of the summoning circle which bound her in place. Its power would keep her locked within, and only when the summoner broke the circle would she be set free from it. Summons were a way for mortals to barter favors from demons, and a way for demons to royally piss each other off, summoning amongst their kind considered an offense.

With the exception of a cunning few who had possessed the foresight to ensure their survival had value to Amara, all who dared summon her in the past hadn't lived long enough to see their bargains fulfilled. Most in the realms knew not to dare call upon her. And yet, someone had.

Her own magic rose to the fore, tendrils of black swirling around her, filling the confinement she was bound to, eager to lash out and strike.

"Who summons me?"

Except for her ungraceful landing, she appeared utterly unaffected by her poorly timed summons, though nothing could be further from the truth, she was seething.

"Amara?"

An unfamiliar voice called to her, masculine and commanding yet his tone filled with wonderment. Unusual, but not entirely undeserved, she had worked hard on earning her nefarious reputation.

"Yes, I'm well aware of my own name, I asked for yours."

Great, had she been summoned by a first timer? She hadn't popped anyone's summoning cherry before. But then, how had the compulsion been so strong that she'd been unable to break from it?

"Your eyes. I can see her in you."

She bristled. "If it's my eyes you bargain for, I must warn you that their price is astonishingly high. Took me twelve moons to regenerate the last pair."

“Your eyes…? What? No! What kind of horrid deals have you been making, Priestess?”

“The kind which always turn in my favor.”

She had traded them for the heart string of a cherubim, a hard to come by ingredient for a potion she kept.

Her fingers closed around the hilt of her athame as she peered into the distance, still unable to identify who had called for her.

It would take a great deal of power to shatter the summoning circle, power she had diligently saved and was hesitant to use. Power she’d been harvesting within her athame for a special occasion, a special someone rather. But if she had to, she could free herself, and kill her summoner. Never again would she leave herself too powerless to protect herself, too weak to escape.

“I must warn you that I am neither patient of character nor in the habit of repeating myself.”

As she spoke, the figure beyond her line of sight stepped out from the shadows, his appearance slowly revealed by the light of the moon and bright stars decorating the night sky.

Lips parted on a silent gasp as shock ran its course. Her summoner had no need to announce himself, for Amara instantly recognized the being standing before her. Portraits of his likeness adorned the halls of the Nessus; his features graced the pages of countless history books. She had studied them all, had wanted to learn everything about the demon whose name was the final one on her list. The exiled Prince of Secrets.

“Levistus.”

“You honor me, Priestess Amara.”

“Then you misunderstood my intent.” Indignation filled her, how dare he—after all the damage he’d caused—summon her.

He strolled along the circumference of her confinement, black eyes taking in every inch of her. He looked at her as if she were a curiosity on display for his personal assessment. And she decided in that moment that she was going to enjoy killing him.

Her shoulders straightened, her chin instinctively tilting up in defiance of his inspection. Rather than be angry, she ought to feel grateful for his summons — after all, he just made the task of finding him infinitely easier. She hadn't been looking forward to visiting the Stygia.

“I assume it was Cassius who summoned you from your icy grave? What a foolish thing to do.”

The corner of his full lips turned into a mischievous smile. The gesture oddly familiar, yet she couldn’t place it.

“You believe I pose a threat to the King of the Hells?”

The force of her magic intensified around her, reflecting the turmoil she felt deep within. Rather than give into the temptation to unleash it, she reeled it in tightly. Forcing a matching cool smile to grace her expression in answer to his.

“I believe you to be a threat to anyone who gets in your way. Although I fail to see how a demon prince and a warlock prisoner could ever have managed such a feat.”

As expected, his roguish smile faltered at her accusation. Had he truly expected her to remain ignorant of the details of that night?

The instant she’d been set free from her prison, Amara had tirelessly retraced the events which had led to her demon’s death. She would see *her* Cassius avenged, and see all responsible brought to their knees. That’s how Levistus had made her list. Azadiel— their teacher, their guardian and friend had betrayed them, but it was his master who had orchestrated it all from within his icy grave.

His voice was full of conviction. “You know nothing of what I’ve done, of what was sacrificed...”

Her voice was filled with loathing. “Quite the contrary Levistus, I’m intimately acquainted with the sacrifices made. It was due to your orders that Cassius was destroyed, and I…”

The words stuck in her throat, her grip easing her athame from her waist. *Another life, a different girl, a different demon.*

“We were the sacrifices to your ambitions.”

“I had my reasons.”

Only the fact they were standing upon the soil of Gaia kept her from thrusting her athame into the barrier and attacking the demon prince. She could break free, but the ley-lines siphoned their powers. On the mortal realm her magic would prove too weak to kill him, and physically he was stronger. The fallen General of the Heavens and Prince of the Hells had chosen his location wisely.

“Why did you summon me?”

He came to stand before her, his height dominating her own. If he sought to intimidate however, he would soon discover that she wasn't easily cowed.

"I need to see her..."

"Ahh yes." A cruel smile twisted her lips, her talents for necromancy made this a cry she had heard many times before. "I assume you refer to Benzosia? If so then… yes, I can see how you would be in need of my assistance."

Everyone with an ear for gossip had eventually learned of the forbidden romance between the tragic Queen of the Hells and the Demon Prince of Secrets. Rumors claimed Benzosia had rejected him in favor of Asmodeus, and in turn Levistus had killed her in a fit of jealous rage.

Amara reserved doubts about the truth of that rumor. Not because she believed Levistus incapable of the crime—quite the contrary. No, her doubt stemmed from knowing the origin of the rumor, Basileus.

"I'd be delighted to arrange a reunion between you and your lady love, Levistus. Just release me from this circle and I'll personally send you to the underworld where you may join her."

To emphasize her words she ran her athame along the barrier, watching it spark where her blade met. "My price will be your head mounted above my mantle, a bargain really."

"A reasonable price, some may even claim it overdue. But you'll not get your vengeance on me, Priestess, until I've claimed my own."

He circled her, she turned to follow, not letting the demon prince out of her sight.

"You and I have enemies in common, Amara, enemies you have no access to. You can't attack a member of the demonarchy without risking a fallout between the Hells and Asurim. And it would be a shame to see your struggling realm fall into a war it cannot hope to survive. You need the infernal energy, without it your warlocks have no magic, since your realm has none to spare."

"I gave you no permission to use my name, and the Demon King would never turn on me."

The smile Levistus gave her was cold, calculated. She was watching the puppet master at work.

"Likely true, the King does seem the loyal type. But Cassius cannot protect you if he no longer holds the throne."

And there it was, their greatest weakness exposed by the Prince of Secrets. If Cassius lost his crown, it would only be a matter of time before the eyes of the next monarch of Hell would again fall upon Asurim.

“Think on it, Priestess, I don’t bear the responsibility of a realm upon my shoulders. And unlike your needlers and assassins, my actions could never be traced back to you.”

She didn’t want to hear this, didn’t want anything from him other than his head pried loose from his shoulders. But he was dangling just the right bait.

“I possess the knowledge and power to destroy our enemies from the inside. I have a place within the demonarchy, and the King’s ear. But I cannot do what must be done if I am cursed or dead.” Black eyes gazed at her in victory. “You need me, alive and as your ally.”

With her sisters gone, she had been forced to wear the crown which had been destined to grace Calista’s head. Vengeance had been made near impossible while acting as Sarratum, charged with the task of protecting her realm and its people. At the same time, the sin-eater wasn’t gaining much ground. The demon was losing control over his realm, his hold on his throne weakening as his enemies grew emboldened. They were in desperate need of an ally within the demonarchy, one who knew how to steer its politics and undo whatever damage Basileus had done.

“Hells.”

Moments passed between them as she considered the implications of his words. He was powerful enough to do it, and was already a piece on the board now that Cassius had set him free. Better to keep the Prince of Secrets where she could see his movements.

“What exactly are you offering?”

Dark eyes held hers. “I offer Cassius my knowledge and service in keeping his claim on the throne. I rid the Nessus of Basileus and any who seek to overthrow Cassius as ruler of the Nessus and King of the Nine Hells.”

“Damn it.”

With a sense of defeat she shoved her athame back into its sheath at her waist. She desperately wanted to reject his offer, wanted so badly to end him for setting in motion the destruction of her life and that of her demon, but she couldn’t. His offer simply held too great a value, could be the difference between defeat and survival for both her and Cassius.

“You know what was done to the sin-eater thanks to your meddling. So, you are aware of the risks involved in serving him?”

There was no expression on his face, no sign of remorse or guilt as he spoke. “He has no memory older than one hundred and forty years, his mind was altered and his soul destroyed. Should he ever become consciously aware that he is in fact, already dead, his mind will break and his body will wither. Yes, I am aware.”

“I will kill you for what you did to him Levistus, you know this.”

“Yes, and that is why I’ve summoned for you, to make a bargain. I know you won’t ever forgive what I have done, nor am I foolish enough to ask it of you. All I ask in return for what I offer is a temporary truce. Your vow that you make no attempt on my life until our vengeance is met, Asmodeus must die before I do. After that, my head will grace your mantle if you will it.”

“And you won’t harm Cassius… I mean, the sin-eater?”

Dark brows rose up, his expression unreadable. “You have my vow, the young king will come to no harm by my doing, and neither will you.”

With a defeated sigh she sent a small prayer up to the dark gods, beseeching them to ensure this would not be yet another decision she would come to regret.

“Alright Levistus, I accept your terms.”

The summoning circle shattered, releasing her from the bind as a sudden rush of power engulfed them both, an agreement struck, a vow sealed in magic.

32

DANCE, PUPPET

HE DIDN'T OPEN HIS EYES UNTIL THE WORLD STOPPED RUMBLING.

And then he wished he hadn't.

His father stood over him, massive wings casting a shadow, making his father's face look diabolical in the light shining down on him; his focus so intent on Cass the surrounding rift remained largely unformed.

The room was blurred at the edges, but the manifestation that surrounded them rang with familiarity. The usual luxury his father chose to surround himself with inside his prison realm was gone. Instead he was surrounded by stone walls decorated with iron chains, blood and dirt caked on the floor—the sight of it made his stomach flip.

Pain burst in his chest when his father's boot met his ribs. Choking, gasping for breath, he tried to shake off his sleep haze; the pain sharpening his wits. Cassius got up to his hands and knees and was knocked back down as a boot hit his gut.

"What have you done?" his father shouted, bending down to pick him up, only to slam him against the stone wall.

Had to… catch… breath…

"Stop!" He held up his shaking hands, his body in shock, his brain not processing.

Knuckles met his cheekbone as the back of his father's hand met his face.

He thought this would be over—thought it had been a culmination of errors he was able to last time—this was intentional. He was summon-able

at his father’s will. To be tormented in secret?

His breaths choked off as his father’s hand tightened around his throat.

“There is a balance to be kept,” his father snarled right in his face, as his hand tightened, cutting off all of Cass’s air.

“You’ve given your voice to a celestial being!” Asmodeus was back to shouting.

Cassius didn’t remember ever seeing his father outwardly angered. Sadly, he could admit to himself that he was truly afraid.

And couldn’t talk. Because he could no longer breathe.

His chest burned from the lack of oxygen, black spots swimming in his vision.

“There are LAWS,” his father shouted again, slamming Cass’s head against the wall before finally releasing him.

He slid down the wall, slumping into a heap, fighting to retain consciousness. The grit covering the cold stone of the floor dug into his face, he couldn’t shift the weight off his fresh bruises. One breath. All he could smell was the rotting of old blood. Another breath.

Throat burning, shooting pains tore through his chest with each breath —he suspected one of his ribs was broken, it hurt worse than being stabbed, the pain renewing with each movement.

Had to get up, *save her...*

A ripping pain seared his skull as his father gripped his hair, pulling him up by it, snapping him back to his senses, ensuring Cass had no choice but to meet his eyes.

“By what right,” his father hissed, spittle landing across Cass’s face, “do you have to bind yourself to an angel? Who do you think you are?”

Tears leaked out the corners of his eyes. He liked to believe it was just from the pain of having his hair ripped out.

“Your son,” he whispered, voice haggard and raw. “The only son and heir of Asmodeus.” He cried out when that punishing grip tightened.

His father sat back on his heels, finally releasing him, seeming to collect himself, though the fury still burned brightly in his flame-blue eyes. Cassius knew better than to break eye contact. That would just make things worse. Always worse.

“You were born of a vessel barely worthy of my seed,” Asmodeus said, jaw ticking. “The only reason I kept you is because it was apparent from a young age that you had the capacity to wield my power.”

He stood abruptly, pulling Cass up by his neck. “You are corruption. you think to tie yourself to anything inherently good? Anything pure will fall prey to your nature—you are demon born—any celestial blood of mine runs thin in those veins.”

He shook Cass again. “And when my former brothers come for you and end your misbegotten life, all of your trespasses against me will come to light. My throne had better still stand.”

His head bounced off against the wall once more and he was pushed through the portal and back into his bedroom.

“My lord.” Leira was there, gasping, reaching for him as he lay curled into himself.

He angrily swiped the tears from his face.

“Leave me.” He kept his face averted.

“Let me see to your wounds.” She fussed over him, wiping up blood.

He hadn’t even realized he was bleeding.

With a growl, he lunged to his feet, picking her up and turning her over the bed. His chest was rattling, agony spearing him with each indrawn breath, the pain driving him to near madness.

“You want to see to me?” he purred into her ear, a warning in his tone. “You want me when I’m like this?”

She whimpered, her feet moving apart, legs spreading and those delectable hips wiggling as she adjusted herself. There was no true concern, her care spurred only by the lust he could already sense clinging to her.

Without a thought, he pushed down his pants and threw her skirt up around her waist, plunging his fingers in roughly... a little desperately.

“Yes,” she moaned throatily, bucking back against his hand.

“You need this?” He pushed his fingers deeper, pumping them slowly.

“Please. Yes.” She whimpered, hands grasping the bedsheets.

He pulled his fingers out and grasped his cock, running his shaking hand up and down, coating it in her juices, before easing it into her welcoming heat. Slowly, needing to hear her beg.

“Please,” she whimpered and he plunged deep and hard.

She gasped loudly when he was buried fully, and he grasped her hips, wrenching them back toward his. Her juices were running down her leg, he thrust even harder, moving his fingers over her clit, her moans turning into pants.

He fucked her so hard, the heavy wooden bed inched across the floor under them—until she cried out, her scream hoarse, her sheath clenching him so hard…

He pulled out, watching dazedly as spurts of semen landed across her ass, over the back of her wings—dizziness making his vision dim.

He pulled his pants up and walked over to his chaise before collapsing.

He blinked open his eyes, and she stood over him.

“Do you need anything, my lord? A salve?”

“Leave me,” he spoke abruptly, turning from her.

He ignored the resentment that flared through her silvery eyes, closing his own eyes once more, listening to the soft click of his door.

33

WASN'T SALVATION PROMISED?

HE AWOKE NOT MUCH LATER TO FIND TWO PAIRS OF EYES STARING DOWN AT him. One pair the color of vibrant moss, their depths filled with begrudged concern. Only Jez'Piel had that look. The other pair were pitch black and rapidly filling with rage. Unmistakably Levistus.

"Son."

"Don't," Cass ground out, "ever call me that."

Levistus nodded, walked off and came back a moment later with a warm cloth. He dabbed it at Cass's cheek, brows drawn together. His mind still hadn't caught up, teasing him with the scent of poisons and dark magic.

"He did this to you?" Levistus spoke softly, looking him over.

Cass nodded, turning his head away from the demon's enquiring looks. He duly noted that his shirt was being removed, and heard the hissing intake of breath from the other demon.

"He doesn't deserve to have a son," Levistus said, mumbling under his breath, something dark and sorrowful hidden within that statement.

Cold settled into his soul. Perhaps Levistus hadn't killed Benzosia, but clearly he'd done something that weighed on him.

Levistus bent over him, wrapping something around his ribs, and Cass was hit with a hauntingly familiar scent. Underlying the ozone of magic—jasmine and winter berries, herbs—and her.

Levistus smelled of *his* priestess.

Injuries forgotten, Cass pushed Levistus aside and jumped to his feet.

He'd been to see the Priestess. *His* Priestess.

He thought when she'd denied him it was because of what he was, demon, corruption. Guess he'd been wrong, Levistus was more of a demon than he. It was *who* he was.

"What were you doing with her?" Cass snarled, gripping the front of Levistus' shirt before dropping him and pulling himself through the portal that led directly into Amara's rooms.

Cassius was growling and in a blinding rage when he set his sight on her. The scent of her lust hit him, obliterating what was left of his rationality.

She refuses to be with him—yet Levistus saunters in—he could smell Levistus's essence all over her. Something had transpired between them.

Mara's eyes widened with surprise, then softened as she looked him over, resting on his swollen face.

It was possibly pity in her gaze, but it wasn't registering. Nothing was.

They entered a pact together first. Levistus had no right to her…

He picked her up, hands under her ass, and pressed her against the wall. Her legs wrapped around his waist as though this were a long-practiced move between them. A moment of passion instead of one fueled by mindless fury.

"He can't have you." Cass bared his teeth. "We have a bargain, you and I. You bound your fealty to me, you're mine," his voice softened, "and I'm yours. Until our agreements are fulfilled."

Amara gasped, ire flashing in her eyes, her hand going up to his throat, softly for a moment, some inexplicable emotion flashing in her eyes before she dug the tips of her claws in. The mingling scent of her lust and Levistus pounded through his brain, stealing his rationality.

"I should just take you." His voice broke as she squeezed his throat.

He hissed in a breath as her hand tightened over the fresh bruises, but leaned in closer anyway, lips nearly touching hers.

"Have it all."

His tongue dipped out to touch her lower lip and her entire body stiffened. "If you're going to be with anyone…"

"I've been with him for almost a century, Cass." She cut over his hoarse murmurs. "This is nothing new, nor have you ever cared before." Her own words came out with a shaky breath.

He paused, taking a moment to process what she was saying. A moment to breathe. She couldn't be speaking of Levistus, he'd not been freed. He shifted his grip, registering her softness, pliant against his rock-hard erection. His fingers dug in and he rocked against her, her soft gasp audible enough to send heat blazing down his spine.

Her scent, her lust was taunting him; familiar, addictive...

"You don't touch her like that," Levistus shouted from the entrance of the portal.

He felt a hand grip his shoulder, wrenching him back, just enough for Amara to slide down between his body and the wall.

Amara's angry black death glare moved from Cass to Levistus standing over his shoulder. Then back to Cass.

"You ever speak to me like that again, sin-eater, and I'll be reconsidering our bargain." She finally released his throat, her claws tracing a path down his front, coming to rest at the top of his rib cage where the bandages started.

He grabbed her hand, and licked up her fingers, sucking his blood off them one at a time.

"Don't have sex with him, Mara. I have very few allies and wouldn't want to lose any."

"Are you threatening to kill my sexual partners now?" The anger in her voice had been replaced by a different kind of heat, as she watched his tongue run over each of her fingertips.

"Just... not him." Cass kissed the tip of each finger and pressed his thumb to her bottom lip. "If I can't have you—just not him."

He backed up directly into Levistus, sidestepped him, unravelled the bloody bandages from his chest and tossed them on her desk as he made his way to the door.

"You're leaving now?" Levistus said, his tone void of emotion. "You are rasher and more impulsive…"

"Going out to the temple to find a few warlocks to fuck," he cut over Levistus and shot a hurt, angry glare at Amara before walking out into the temple.

34

AND HE DOES HAVE HALF A MIND, AT LEAST

CASS PULLED HIS FINGERS FROM THE WARLOCK'S MOUTH AFTER SHE greedily sucked off her own juices. She sank back down on his cock, and he grabbed her hips to thrust roughly, nearly unseating her. His power greedily fed, yet his thoughts remained detached.

He didn't want either of these females, he was distinctly craving *one*. Not a healthy spot for a demon that feeds off lust.

He pulled the other female over his face, leaving her chest to chest with the one riding him, his tongue delving into her slick folds, feeling the twitching of her building orgasm across his flattened tongue.

The scent of Mara's desire fixated his thoughts, stole his concentration. His enjoyment of this. *Been with him for a hundred years.*

He heard them kissing each other, moaning into one another's mouths, and growled against her flesh, bucking his hips up to keep up the momentum of the other, trying to remain in the moment. Her sheath started clenching around him, and with a rough groan, he pinched his teeth over the other's clit—it was like a little game to him, to see if he could get them off at the same time.

Mara hadn't been speaking of Levistus. She meant the Huntsman, and in no way did he have any rights to be angry about that. They'd been together for almost as long as he'd known her.

The one on his face screamed first, grinding herself over his mouth, his own orgasm burning through him at the same time as the other screamed her release to the rafters.

He tapped the ass of the one on his face, easing her off, and lifted the other one off him. Both were sweating and trembling, collapsing onto the settee beside him. He swiped his arm across his face, gave them each a kiss and sauntered off to the shower.

He could freely breathe and think again, it occurred to him that perhaps he'd jumped to conclusions.

And perhaps, that rage that still simmered in his gut was jealousy. The Dark Fae didn't deserve to have her. He was betrothed to another.

Perhaps, she wasn't averse to a demon suitor and he just needed to be on his best behavior. She was cursed, he was haunted and broken; both unable to love. Of course it made sense.

He made quick work of cleaning himself, wrapped a towel around his waist and walked back into her bedroom, both her and Levistus turning to watch him.

With a wicked grin, he grabbed Amara by the waist and tossed her on the bed, following to land on top of her. She snarled and pushed his chest, the menacing sound eliciting a soft rumble of laughter from him.

"Mara." Nuzzling her neck as he hid his smile, sure it would only encourage her to follow through on her threat. "I was in a shit mood."

"Bit of an understatement I'd say."

Her hand went up to his face, gently cupping his cheek. The warmth of her touch easing pain he wasn't even aware he had been feeling.

"I owe you no explanation for my actions, demon…"

"Mara, I'm sorr…"

A slender finger was pressed to his lips. "I did meet with Levistus earlier this day, and you must know there is old animosity between us which I cannot freely discuss. All you need know is that a truce was agreed upon between the old goat and myself in honor of a mutual interest, that of keeping your fine ass seated upon that uncomfortable looking throne."

"Someone's all healed up." Levistus commented from the other side of the room. "And priestess, I may be ancient, but I am in no way to be compared to a goat."

They both turned to stare the demon prince, or more precisely, at the dark goatee which adorned his face. She almost smiled then, but it faltered when his own gaze met hers once more.

"I recognize the signature of those injuries, you've met with your father."

She also knew most of his secrets.

With a sigh, Cass rolled onto his back, slipping his arm under Amara's neck, forcing her to slide in close. He tugged off twisted up towel and tossed it over the side of the bed.

Levistus cleared his throat and Amara pulled a blanket over his waist, shaking her head as she began to pull away.

"Stay…please."

Recognition flared through her gaze. Instinct had him reaching for her, his fingers finding the curve of her neck, his thumb trailing along her pulse. She swayed, he pulled, coaxing her to him until her head came to rest upon his shoulder, the feel of her weight upon it the most natural thing in the world.

Things had shifted between them since the night they slept tangled up in each other. The night she eased his dreams. The line had been moved, perhaps it could be pushed further still?

"My father summoned me again." He picked up a piece of her hair and examined it in the low light of the room. He liked the blue she had chosen this time, it made her eyes brighter. "Never actually seen him outwardly in a rage. He's usually so cold about it."

"He just summons you at his whim?" Amara tensed, her words seething.

"You saw the shape he was in. Asmodeus goes too far." Levistus piped in.

Amara shot Levistus a bemused look. One that clearly read *'you don't know the half of it, fucker'*.

She fought out of his hold and sat up. "We need to find a way to bind you from his summons."

He smiled. "Oh but of course. Why didn't I think of that?" He snapped his fingers to accent his sarcasm.

Her eyes glinted, an odd expression flashing within their cyan depths. Their color had always invoked images of the sun glinting off the Caribbean seas at the shoreline.

"I see you fed well. Are the courtesans still standing?"

He licked his lips in remembrance. "Curious acolytes this time, and they might not be walking properly for a while."

Amara rolled those tempestuous eyes. "Demon, you prove ruinous to productivity within your own temple."

Levistus coughed, turning to pour himself a drink

He caught her looking down at her hands, picking at her tiny claws, hiding her expression as soon as she had discovered him staring.

“Why did he strike you this time?”

She knew, probably better than anyone about his relationship with his father. He’d visited her near daily over the span of an entire decade, she’d never asked about the bruises and broken bones—and he’d found out early on that she could feed off his pain and ease him. One of the many secrets that remained unspoken between them. Not that he was of mind to let her keep that secret to herself for much longer. Even fully sated, his body stirred at the memory of feeding her with his misery, and her delectable response to it.

“Sin?”

Cass pulled his free hand behind his head while trying to recall what her question had been. “I got myself a Herald. Turns out that my selection did not meet his approval.” He tapped a finger to his lips. “As a matter a fact I believe it met with no one’s approval.”

The small smile she shot him caught him off guard, his chest filling with… something unfamiliar, something pleasant, caused by the pride which had flashed through her eyes, pride for him.

“That only means you chose a Herald who is not within your father’s reach, or that of anyone within the demonarchy. Well played, demon.”

“Do you have a way to block him from summoning me?” Dread was seeping into his chest once again, his jovial mood plummeting as he recalled his circumstances.

To be summoned at his father’s whim, no better than powerless in that realm…

“I do know of an object.” She leaned down on an elbow, her eyes running over his bare chest. “A ring held by the Blood Lord.”

“By all the Hells.” Cass sighed, running his hand down his face. “Are you suggesting we steal from a vampire?” The smile spread slowly across his face.

“No, I’m suggesting we go steal the ring, the fact we’d be taking it from the Blood Lord is merely a bonus.” Amara’s malevolent grin matched his own.

“You’re smarter than this, Cassius.” Levistus stood and walked over to the bed. “Investigate other possibilities before you run off and instigate

conflict with a known ally of your father. The vampire is ancient. Therefore, powerful."

Cass and Amara both looked up at him. "And I'm not? Powerful that is?" Cass asked, his tone edging on belligerent.

"Perhaps after some rest, we'll have thought of a better way." Levistus nodded to Amara. "I'll leave you to your… sleep and see you both in the morning."

He sighed deeply and pulled the blankets up to his chin. "Will you sleep beside me?" He mumbled as his eyes got heavier.

She didn't say anything, but didn't pull out of his hold either. So he just kept holding her close until sleep consumed him.

35

BECAUSE IT'S THE MOST FUN

"AMARA IS THIS REALLY THE BEST OPTION?"

"Are you backing out?" She topped off two glasses with potion. "This ring is the only object I've found mention as having the ability to block a summons." One she could have used for herself.

"It's not that bad." Cass looked up at her from beneath the thick fringe of his lashes. "I can handle my father."

That was the problem, the only reason she'd give up her chance at being able to block a summons. Because he *couldn't* handle Asmodeus. How does one deal with a psychopath? No, she didn't know the answer to that either, the best way she could think was to keep Cass out of his grasp. The demon may have forgotten the damage his father was capable of, but she remembered every last incident with clarity. Recently even had opportunity to revisit them in her nightmares.

"Cassius." Aza tapped his cheek again, "I need you to tell me what happened."

Cass blinked, then blinked again, closing his eyes tight and opening them with a squint.

"I touched the Ruby Rod," Cass whispered. "He left it on top of my book, I only meant to move it." He swallowed audibly. "He hit me with it?" His voice raised as though he were posing a question instead of stating a fact.

"Hit you where Cass?" Aza was grinding his teeth, his anger vibrating in the air surrounding them. "Cass! Stay with me."

She fought off the memory of Cassius beaten and bloodied, shot him a cheeky grin while handing him the foul looking potion, which even she had to admit, somehow managed to smell even worse than it looked.

“Smells like week-old death,” Cass said, holding the back of his hand over his nose. “There’s no other way?”

“Do you have a better idea how to sneak into a master vampire's home unnoticed?”

Cassius grumbled before putting the glass containing his share of the revolting potion aside with a grimace.

“Just because transfiguration is our best bet, does not mean I have to like it. Look at me, any alterations to my natural appearance are a crime against creation itself.”

Levistus chuffed softly from his seat in the corner of the potion room they had all gathered in. “Your humility is exemplary my king.”

Cassius turned to him, his usual cocky grin in place. “There is no need to be humble when one is speaking the truth.”

Dominus Oberith came into the small room, carrying a pile of clothes within his arm. “I’ve secured the items you requested Sarratum, but if I may be so bold, I do strongly advise against this plan.”

Levistus instantly chimed in. “Finally. One other sensible being in this godsforsaken place, you two are acting more like teenagers rather than monarchs and rulers of your own realms. Can we not try to go about this more sensibly?”

“Where’s the fun in that? And for your information demon, Asurim is anything but gods-forsaken, in fact, we require regular banishments to keep them from loitering about rather than returning to the ether.” She grimaced. The death god in particular had a nasty habit of breaking the wards.

“Please, do tell us your suggestions.” Cass raised a brow, a condescending smirk on his face as he addressed Levistus. “If not, let us get this over with.”

Levistus’s mouth snapped shut and he turned to busy himself with mixing a drink.

She quickly snagged the items out of Oberith’s hands, while Cassius grinned at her, mischief lighting up his eyes. Their excitement a stark contrast to the exasperated look on the faces of both advisors.

Oberith helped Mara sort through the pile of clothing, her face scrunching up in distaste at the sight of the lively pinks and collection of ruffles her outfit consisted of.

“Did you rob a beauty pageant for this stuff?”

Oberith’s expression revealed not the slightest hint of amusement. “A what?”

“Just… never mind.” She heard Cassius chuckle from behind her and quickly tossed him his selections “Quiet you, you didn't get off easy either.”

He caught the items, and Mara laughed at the sight of the demon’s expression as his smile turned into a grimace of his own.

“Corduroy and flowers? Come on!”

Oberith moved to stand before them, “Those outfits belonged to Dimitri and Teresa DiSilvestro, husband and wife and progeny of the Blood Lord himself. As long as the potion doesn’t wear off, and you don’t attract attention to yourselves, you should have free range throughout the vampire’s mansion.”

“You chose velvet and neon pink clothing, then expect us to keep a low profile?” She eyed the fabric again; suddenly not so convinced this had been one of her more brilliant ideas.

“Should be easy enough,” Levistus said, his tone dripping with sarcasm, “just don't pull any of the hijinks the two of you are known for. Are either of you even capable of stealth?” Levistus took a seat, Oberith giving him an amused smile in response before moving to stand before Mara.

“The item you search for was moved from the exhibition hall at the New York museum in Gaia to the Blood Lord’s estate in the night realm of Nuit. Robbing the museum would’ve been a far easier feat than breaking into his private vault.”

“And yet, not nearly as gratifying as stealing it from under Jareth's own nose,” Cassius quipped from behind her, earning him a smile as his fingers closed around the nape of her neck.

He must’ve picked up on her hesitation, as his thumb moved to reassuringly stroke along the curve of her neck, before reaching for the platinum clasp holding her robes together.

“We need to get ready, you two, outside,” Cass said, not even turning to address them, expecting his orders to be obeyed without question.

Both men stood up instantly.

“Cassius, I’m not sure that’s the best idea.”

“With all due respect Demon King, I answer to my Priestess only.”

The heat of his fingers against her skin worked as a spell on her mind, her body instantly easing into that simple caress.

“Oberith, Levistus, please leave us.”

With a nod, they both made to exit the room, but not before Amara caught sight of Levistus expression, aggravation etching deep lines on his otherwise beguiling appearance.

-*click*-

She felt the clasp give beneath his skilled fingers, followed by the flow of silk against skin as the fabric of her robes slid down her body, pooling at her feet, leaving her exposed with her back turned to him.

“Mara…”

He held her close as his fingers began a slow, maddening descent along the curve of her spine before spreading over her hip, digging in and pulling her back flush against him, making sure she felt his own response to her.

“Sin… stop.”

“Many times, I’ve imagined you standing before me naked like this.”

He rocked against the swell of her ass, forcing a moan from her lips as his fingers dug into her hips, keeping her in place before sliding his free hand down to her inner thigh.

“Cass.”

“I can hear your heartbeat Mara. I can scent your arousal, I can feel your heat beckoning my touch. I could make you come against my fingers so easily, giving us both what we need.” His voice lowered to a sexy rasp. “Just say yes.”

“Ye…”

“Highness, Dominus Oberith asked me to bring some shoes to complete your ensemble. It took me a little while to find something fitting, I couldn’t find Er-Agate so I borrowed them from…. Oh, dark gods forgive me, I didn’t mean intrude!”

The young acolyte dropped the shoes in her rush to vacate the room, clearly mortified at having barged in. She fled, and sense returned, urging Amara to squirm out of his hold, and reach for the gods-awful pink dress at the very same time he did.

“Stop messing around, Sin.”

She reached for it, only for him to snag her wrists in a quick move and pull them above her head.

“I heard you Mara, as clearly as I can sense your desire.”

The feel of soft chiffon brushed along her arm, air seizing in her lungs when his lips pressed a kiss against her nape. Then surprising her as his fingers began to ease the fabric of the ridiculous dress down her body.

“Waiting until after this is done with won’t kill me.”

She turned on him with a sweet smile, holding the vile potion in one hand, the flower embroidered suit in the other.

He grimaced at her, notching his chin towards the offensive garments. “Those however, just might…”

36

WHO YOU CALLING FODDER

"JUST A LITTLE KISS?" CASS PULLED AMARA CLOSER, GRINNING LIKE A mad fool. He was getting to her. "Enough to wash the taste out of my mouth?"

"Grow a set, Sin. I have the same taste in my mouth," she said, scraping her teeth over her tongue.

"Mmm." He leaned over and smelled her neck. "You don't look like you, but you still smell like you. Is that going to be a problem, with the vampire and all?"

Amara stilled. "The potion hasn't fully taken hold. Give it a few moments."

"You look charming in pink frills. The fact that I can still scent your arousal is making my senses go haywire. A good little girl wrapped in ribbons and silk." He dropped to his knees and pressed his face into the dress. "And smells like sin itself."

Amara pulled at his hair, letting out a devious chuckle, "behave, demon."

"Stop treating this like a game," Levistus snarled. "You're about to enter the domain of a vampire who's as old as some of the eldest demons in the Hells and the two of you are fucking about."

Cass stood, brushing the wrinkles out of the stiff corduroy pants. "You forget, Levistus, that two of us have both had dealings with the Blood Lord before."

“Then you know you are about to enter the lion’s den,” Levistus said, shaking his head. “This is foolish. Be certain that the Vampire has been plotting your father’s release from his imprisonment—and you could be serving yourself up to Jareth as the device to set Asmodeus free.” He made a move toward Cass, his expression cold and dark.

Amara stepped between them. “Don’t downplay the power Cassius and myself are capable of. The Blood Lord may be old as grave dirt and cunning as a wraith, but in full confrontation, I’m laying my bets with myself and the Demon King.”

Levistus stepped back, shaking his head. “Your arrogance—does he feed off your pride, Priestess?” he said, nodding toward Cass.

Cass wrapped an arm around Amara’s shoulder from behind her, pulling her back to his chest.

“We’re not being stupid about this.” His tone was a warning, plain and simple.

Levistus’s eyes were pure black. “I’ll stop Asmodeus from being freed, no matter who is fodder. Keep that in mind, son.”

Cass growled. Was the demon insinuating that he was on his own if he fucked up here?

“I won’t let myself get taken, Levistus. I’m neither fodder, nor a pawn.”

Amara eased out of his grasp, fixing Levistus with a murderous glare before turning to face him.

“We have around six hours with the potion, depending how fast we metabolize it. Time’s ticking.”

“We’ve got this, right?” Cass swallowed hard, the weight of the situation hitting. “I can suck it up. He doesn’t usually get physical...”

“Every time he summons you, he siphons off more of your power, finds more weakness to exploit. This isn’t just for your sake demon, we’re in this one together,” she said, patting his cheek.

“A kiss for luck?” Cass said, trying to keep a straight face.

“You’re pushing your luck.” Amara grumbled under her breath as they walked through the portal hand-in-hand.

They came through to an empty landscape enveloped by shadows and silvery mist, fairy lights beckoning with ghostly radiance, lining a path that led towards a glowing mansion in the distance, music from the manor spilling out over the grounds. People were piling in through the doors,

happy chatter carried back on the breeze to where Cass and Amara stood, both shocked.

Cass leaned in close and whispered right in Amara's ear, "what were you saying about luck, Priestess?"

She blinked up at him, smile spreading slowly over her face. She tugged on his hand and they made their way forward.

They walked through the large double-doors freely, the faces they wore expected. Thousands of glittering crystals hung from chandeliers, casting prisms of light against marble walls. Orchestral music vibrated off the walls, creating a magical ambience. Crowds of people milled about, clumped together in smaller groups, some talking, some dancing.

Servers carrying trays of metal goblets walked the room, Cass snagged two and handed one to Amara before taking a careful sip. Blood wine. It tingled on his tongue.

"Huh." Cass licked his lips and took a bigger mouthful. "He's serving wine laced with faery blood. We're going to be surrounded by magic-drunk vamps."

And they *were* surrounded by vampires. Every being in this room seemed to be of the blood-drinking persuasion. Except one.

Up at the front of the room, sitting at a table with the Blood Lord himself was Basileus. A young man sat propped on his lap, Bas's fingers playing with his hair while idly sipping wine.

Cass's entire body seized, his stomach churning. Of all the places in all the realms… his mind lapsed, memory floating over reality.

"*I won't be able to see you for a while."* He stood in front of the bars, looking down at his hands, trying to act the grown up they told him he now was. *"My power has become apparent."*

"*What does that mean? Why would that keep you away?" She was so sweet. All things innocent, he shouldn't be the one to explain this to her.*

"*It means they'll be training me."*

It meant Bas would be instructing him on his proper duties, no longer would Az's tutelage be at the forefront of his training.

"*And I can't. You should hear what they speak of...no. Actually, you shouldn't." She was still so young. She didn't need to hear this.*

"*Is it all that bad? Can't you refuse?" Her hand reached through the bars and gripped his, holding on as though he were her lifeline.*

“No. I’m a sin-eater and if I don’t learn to feed, I’ll eventually wither away.” He pulled his hand back. Once they’d been the center of each other’s worlds, but he wouldn’t taint her with this.

“I don’t want to do this. I would rather just stay down here with you. You’re my only friend.” He hoped she would remain so. He had no one else.

“They won’t… hurt you?” She was always concerned for him. As though they hadn’t hurt her as well.

“No. this is entirely different, and I shouldn’t even speak of it to you.” They were both too young, but he would shelter her for as long as he could.

“You just said we were friends, and friends tell each other things.”

“It’s about... sex,” he whispered the word, as though his lowered voice would shield her innocent ears. “Bas tells me that’s why the women won’t stay away. I have to learn to control my power or it’ll just get worse.”

“I’ve never felt that kind of power from you.” She giggled. “Will you practice with me, like Aza has me do with my spells?”

His stomach churned. She was too young. Hadn’t even started her monthly courses. Still. There was no one he’d rather explore his power with, no one else he could trust. A few more years and he’d be strong enough to free her, and together they’d run.

“Not until you’re older. Then you’ll be mine, and I’ll be all yours.”

“I know about kissing. It was in that book you brought me. And besides, you aren’t much older than I am.”

His stomach flipped, his thoughts racing. Everything Bas had ‘taught’ him. He hadn’t remembered confessing that to another.

“Amara?” His stomach was queasy, the underside of his tongue going numb.

“I see him too,” she said, her eyes wandering over the room, before going back to that main table.

“Mara—I’m going to…” Cass ran off to the side of the room, fell to his knees beside a large potted tree and emptied his stomach, heaving until there was nothing left inside, his throat raw from retching.

“Sin,” Amara hissed, tugging on his arm. She moved to block him from view as footsteps approached. “He’s fine. Just a little blood drunk.” She tittered away to some unknown concerned bystander.

He took the tissue Amara was discreetly handing him and ran it across his mouth, grabbing up his goblet of blood wine and drinking it down.

“I’m okay.” He ran a hand down his face and stood on shaky feet. “Let’s just get out of here as soon as possible.” He grabbed another goblet as a server walked by and downed it. The faery blood wasn’t going to sit well with his own magic, but the need for alcohol overrode that.

He grabbed another as they walked through the room and downed that too, allowing Amara to steer him through the crowd. He made the mistake of looking over at Bas again, the demon’s lips locked with the male on his lap, his hand busy under the table.

Cold sweat beaded across his forehead, down the back of his neck, his stomach rioting once more.

“You puke again and I’m walking away,” Amara hissed and continued pulling him.

“I’m fine.” Heartless wench. “Let’s just find the damned vault.”

37

‘EYE’ SEE YOUR STAKES AND RAISE THEM

JUST AS EN-RASPUTIN PROMISED, THE POTION ENSURED THEY MET NO challenge while fumbling their way through the crowd. The demon’s sudden ailment was worrisome, but served as the perfect excuse to abandon the merriment and search the upstairs rooms. To most, they would simply look like Dimitri and Teresa DiSilvestro, your average blood drunk vampire couple looking for some privacy. As long as she and the demon stayed out of view of the Blood Lord and his bride, who would surely pick up on any anomalies, their ruse would hold.

The few rooms they opened revealed guests partaking in more intimate celebrations, and despite the fact it took a great deal of effort to cause Amara to blush, some of the scenes they encountered accomplished that feat. Leaving ‘Teresa’ to flush bright red while whispering to ‘Dimitri’ at her side.

“How? That last position breaks laws in both gravity and physics…”

The sin-eater’s voice was weak from nausea, but filled with amusement at her bafflement. “Those tend not to apply with vampires in heat.”

They stumbled their way across four occupied bedrooms, a game room which had the makings of a high limit gambling den, and a magnificent library, before finally discovering the Blood Lord’s private study.

The demon hunched over a vase as he spewed the last of his stomach’s contents into what she guessed to be a priceless heirloom from some long-lost dynasty. Every object within the mansion looked as if it belonged

inside a museum. The sin-eater's sickness hadn't lessened, an adverse reaction to the potion perhaps, but Amara doubted that was the case.

She recognized that deeply haunted look on the sin-eater as he laid shock-black eyes upon the Prince of Pleasures amidst the vampires. She'd seen that expression before within amber eyes.

With a long-suffering sigh, she lowered to kneel beside the demon, brushing his longer than usual hair away from his forehead, and noticed that the golden mane of 'Dimitri DiSilvestro' was already darkening.

"Demon, I realize you're processing a lot, but you need to stop puking. You've heaved up most of the potion already, and I can't tell for sure how much longer the illusion will hold."

"You knew of what he did to me?"

She couldn't tell him the truth. To survive his father's punishment, the demon needed to remain ignorant of his past, of what had been taken from him and what he had been made. Yet she refused to lie to him. So she deflected.

"You forget I am no stranger to your father's cruelty, nor am I ignorant to the depravities Basileus favors. I can imagine well enough what you were made to suffer, sin-eater, but now is not the time to dwell. We have a ring to find."

The sin-eater had never spoken of his past, he didn't remember it. But after many hours spent comforting Cassius, he had eventually confided to her the twisted and depraved teaching of Basileus. She remembered how the taste of her demon's misery and pain had become laced with shame, which settled like acid upon her tongue. They'd been children still when she decided to end the life of the Prince of Pleasures.

What troubled her most was the fact that *he* seemed to remember. Asmodeus had destroyed Cassius and wiped his mind to a blank slate, there was no way the demon should be able to remember trauma from his childhood. Perhaps Basileus was triggering his memories? Perhaps she accidentally had?

"Is that an eye scanner? How in the hells did Jareth get mortal technology to work outside of Gaia?"

The demon's voice pulled her from her thoughts and back into the opulent surroundings of the Blood Lord's private office, and the massive steel door which barred them entry from the vault.

“Not electric, I can sense the imprint of elemental magic trapped within the steel, that’s what must be powering the system. Hurry, I need your eyes.”

Moving as one they rushed for the scanner, the demon already moving in for the lens. But something about his appearance looked off. *Coal-Dark eyes*.

“Wait!” Her hand slammed on his chest, stopping him at the last instant.

“You just said to hurry.”

Her fingers closed over his cheeks, pulling Dimitri’s face to hers.

“If you’re finally going to kiss me, I’d have to say your timing stinks.” He smirked.

“So does your breath.” She patted his cheek with a soft slap, his humor overriding the frustration she had felt. “Your eyes have turned back to normal, if you scan them we’ll likely set off an alarm.”

He’d already reached for his goblet, taking a large swill, swishing the wine and faerie blood through his mouth before audibly swallowing.

“So, what's our next move?”

She grimaced. “You’re going to take it easy on the wine, lightweight.”

He grinned and took another deep draw before handing her the goblet.

“Sure, so what’s the real plan?”

Pressing the goblet to her lips she drained its contents, hiccuped, then looked down and grimaced at the pink ruffles, suddenly reminded of her evening’s attire.

“I somehow doubt Teresa was given access to the vault, so I guess we need to go get ourselves an eye.”

Cass grinned. “Just an eye?”

She smiled back, feeling the heat of the wine and magic of faery blood spread through her as she studied the steel door.

“Won’t have much use for the rest of the body I think.” Her head tilted in thought. “We could probably take a thumb, just in case there’s another scanner inside?”

He pulled the goblet out of her grasp, tossing it carelessly to the side while getting onto his feet, pulling Mara up along with him.

“All right wife, time for us to go mingle.”

Upon re-entering the stately hallway, which held a striking collection of renaissance art from Gaia, they were met by the sound of orchestra

music and laughter rising up from downstairs. The din of festivities underscored by the echoes of muffled cries and the rhythmic sound of thrusting flesh which could be heard from behind the closed doors around them.

As if instinctively able to track Fae wine, the demon quickly zoned in on a conveniently placed a service tray and proceeded to pick up two new goblets. His mischievous grin widening as he handed her one, before taking a long draw from his own.

“How many of the light Fae do you think they drained for this party?”

Mara grinned up at him. “Worried for your Seelie Queen? Honestly, how is it even possible you’ve not yet tupped the virtuous light Fae?”

He nudged her, his face suddenly stern, but amusement shone bright within those dark eyes. A vast improvement over the pain and torment they reflected earlier.

“She is both married and a mother, bite your tongue wench.”

“I’ll happily do it for her should she refuse to...”

The sound of that familiar voice made them both turn to find none other than Basileus standing not ten feet away, accompanied by an unfamiliar male. Neither one would fit the description of handsome, their features were not masculine enough. Delicate of form and feature, beautiful, like fallen angels.

The platinum hair and icy blue eyes which were a trademark to Basileus’s celebrated looks stood in sharp contrast to the raven black hair and deep crimson eyes of the vampire at his side.

It was near impossible to tell age with immortals, but guessing from appearance, the vampire had likely not yet reached his sixteenth year of life before having been turned.

“Teresa, you look like one of those porcelain dolls my sora used to carry around.” The vampire reached to lightly spin her around as he spoke, his tone marked by a slight eastern European timbre. “It makes me want to play with you.”

Even she could sense the heavy influx of lust radiating from both males, her gaze quickly locking with that of the sin-eater as he reached for her mid spin and pressed her back to his side.

“Hasn’t anyone taught you to look but not touch?”

His tone was laced with malice, and had Basileus’s attention not been claimed by the vampire at that precise moment, he surely would’ve

recognized those dark, angry eyes as not belonging to Dimitri, but to the Demon King.

“Dimitri, what has come over you…?” Basileus turned, Cass glared.

Shit...Coming up short with a way to diffuse the situation she pressed her palms against the demon’s cheeks, pulling his head down as she rose up onto her toes and pressed her lips against his. The kiss wasn't tender or sweet, but hard and demanding, meant as a warning.

Rather than pull back and collect himself as she expected, his arms closed around her waist, pulling her into his chest as his fingers splayed against the small of her back. She tried to nip his bottom lip when his kiss began to sear her, his tongue brushing the seam of her lips in demand for her to open.

To her own surprise she did. Gone was the warning she had tried to send him, the world simply fell away, dragging Basileus and the vampire along with it. Only they existed, his kiss stirring up an odd fluttering sensation deep within her belly. And when he slowly withdrew, it was Amara who needed reminding of who they were supposed to be, and the danger they currently found themselves in.

“My apologies, I fear I’ve not fed well tonight. My darling wife was just about to see to my needs.” He grinned down at Amara who regained enough sense to shoot him a murderous look from beneath her lashes. “Would you gentlemen care to join us?”

She hissed near his ear, “what in the nine hells do you think you’re doing Sin?”

He squeezed her side, pushing her along to follow both males who’d already confiscated one of the bedrooms.

“We need the vampire’s eye, and I have some questions for my exiled subject.”

Whether it was due to the wine, the kiss, or the surrealism of their current situation she couldn’t say, but neither could she deny feeling a grin spreading across her lips when looking up at the demon in disguise.

“I’ll flip you a coin for the eye.”

38

NO ONE SAID IT WAS GOING TO BE EASY

His head was swimming. He couldn't recall ever being this addled from alcohol, it was far different from the oblivion of poison. There was a giddiness in his belly, he wanted to pick up the Priestess and twirl her around. Then bend her over the back of this fancy sofa and fuck those frilly panties off her.

As though aware of the direction of his thoughts, Amara glared daggers at him, digging an elbow into his ribs. When she reached for the goblet in his hand, he growled. Too slow. Besides, he was enjoying this feeling.

"Wits about you, demon," she hissed under her breath.

He bent down and stole another kiss, grinning wickedly when her expression went blank. Let her deny it, if that served to appease his Priestess, he knew he was getting to her.

The giddiness sobered when Basileus followed them into the room and shut the door behind them. And suddenly, this game wasn't as fun anymore. His heart began to race, even as he looked for an exit.

Amara's hand tightened around his, and she stepped in front of him, her nimble fingers working at the complicated buttons on his ensemble, her hands running down his chest, soothing him.

"I can't…" he whispered, closing his eyes.

"You can, and you are," she whispered back, patting his cheek.

"I must say, Dimitri," Basileus's smooth voice carried across the room, "I've never known a vampire to be generous with their property."

Amara's eyes widened briefly, her teeth biting down so hard on her lip that blood welled. Cass couldn't help himself. His tongue lapped up the bead of it, lingering long enough that her tongue darted out to meet his.

"Perhaps," Cass said, trying to emulate the proper speech of the vampires, "it's my wife who's sharing me tonight. Is there more wine?"

The young vampire carried over a decanter, refilling Cass's goblet.

"It's quite the soiree," the vampire said, moving back to Basileus's side. "Not very often that Lord Jareth opens his home."

Cass downed the goblet, despite Mara's tugging at his arm.

"I must've missed the memo," Cass said raising his brows as his hand trailed down Mara's spine. "I'm lost as to the reason for it."

Basileus looked up from where he's been running his mouth down the vampire's neck. "I doubt David knows either."

The vampire nodded as he spoke. "We've all been kept out of the dark."

Cass furrowed his brows at the mixed idiom. Wasn't sure if it was an intentional play on words.

"But we are happy to entertain some of the most powerful of our kind here tonight."

Cass and Amara's eyes met. What kind of shit-heap had they landed themselves in?

"Mm, yes." Basileus said, his hands working to remove the vampires clothing. "very entertaining."

Cass shuddered, every part of him recoiling. He didn't want to be in this room. That vampire looked far too young…

"It's odd to see you here, Prince of Pleasures," Amara said, her voice light and flighty. Assuming she sounded like the lady vamp she was impersonating. Cass didn't like it.

Didn't like anything about this.

"I've been invited to stay here, since my visit to this realm will be on-going," Bas said, his blue eyes glowing, "and I find I don't mind at all."

His hand went down 'David's' pants and Cass's entire body clenched.

Amara whipped around. "Don't you dare puke again," she hissed out low.

"If you would care to feed, Dimitri, my blood is powerful. You and your wife can take turns." Basileus spoke between deep kisses with his vampire lover. "Or both of you at once."

His breath caught in his throat. He couldn’t do this. Bad fucking idea all the way around.

Amara’s leg raised up and hooked around his waist, and she pulled his head down.

“Your potion is wearing off too fast. We have to move,” she whispered in his ear.

He sighed with relief, letting his power out by increments, feeling around the room, testing, tasting. The lust was so thick it nearly brought him to his knees. His cock that had been semi-erect all night went completely stiff, and he rocked it against Amara’s hips. Sin absolutely stained the walls of this room. He drank it all in.

“Oh. Shit.” Amara spoke low, easing back from Cass.

The young vamp collapsed to the floor first, Cass took everything corrupted inside of him—it didn’t leave much. He was far older than he appeared and used his youthful appearance to his sick and twisted advantage. The vampire’s sins were so varied, Cass’s head already spinning from wine and faerie blood…

Power swamped his synapses, he groaned, fists clenching, jaw set. And found himself standing in front of Bas. Who had the gall to look him up and down and lick his lips.

He grabbed Bas by the throat and pushed him back to the wall.

“Well, you’re certainly not Dimitri.” Bas grinned crookedly, his hands grasping Cass’s arm as he peered into his eyes. “One word, Cassius, and you’d lose your head.”

He tightened his grip. “Who said I’m going to allow you to speak?” He turned back to Amara. “Forget the coin toss, love. Go for it. I’ve got my own toy.”

Amara’s eyes lit up, well, Teresa’s eyes. But they had the same wicked glint as his Mara. She bent over the quivering heap of vampire on the floor and hooked a dainty claw into the corner of its eye.

“Ooh.” She cooed. “I bet this is going to hurt a lot. Should I go slow?” Her finger dug in deeper. “Or rip it like a band-aid?”

Her claw circled under its eye, the vampire moaning and mewling, Amara’s nostrils flaring. “We must maintain the integrity, so I’m going to be slow and careful-like.”

He couldn’t possibly be harder. Bas’s eyes gleamed, lids heavy, his shaking hand reaching for Cass’s cock—

Cass pulled him forward and slammed him back against the wall until his head bounced.

“You’re not to touch me ever again.” He growled, chest heaving with the exertion of his words.

Then he pulled back a fist and slammed it across Bas’s face, knocking him out cold.

Amara held up an eyeball that trailed some gore, examining it in the lamplight. “Not even a nick.” She smiled proudly and enclosed it in her hand. “You going to finish him off?”

“Let’s just go,” Cass said, shaking his head, trying to clear it. His thoughts were pinging around, fleetingly wiggling out of grasp, power was throbbing through him, alternately subdued by the magic in the faery blood and his wine-soaked brain.

It was a comfortable sort of fog to live in.

He picked up Amara’s hand, smiling and feeling sure of himself once more.

“Let’s go bust into a vault.”

39

IT WAS A MATTER OF DISTRACTION

I can't do this….

The inside of the vault wasn't much larger than her world had once been, five by five, enclosed by walls. No light, no windows… no air.

She was struggling to keep her composure, but knew she wouldn't be able to stay within the small confinement of the vault for much longer. Panic was creeping in. Rivulets of cold sweat trailed down the curve of her back, causing the too tight corset of the pink satin and chiffon gown to cling to her skin.

Pink. She detested the color, it made her skin crawl. Her mouth ran dry and her pulse raced.

Another life, different girl, different demon.… she could do this.

As soon as they acquired the ring of summons, she would be free from this metal prison. They were doing this for the demon's safety, to break his father's power over him, meaning she simply had to pull through, just like he had done.

Again, she reached for the deposit box from which she could sense the imprint of Asmodeus's power emanating, his ring lay within, hidden behind iron locks.

"Would you stop squirming and hold still, I can almost reach the bolt."

Open safe, find the ring, open compartment, unlock box, take the ring, place antidote, get out. The plan, while simple on paper was proving much more complex in reality, mainly due to the fact that the particular safety

box she sensed the damned ring in was built into the iron wall, eight feet off the ground.

She topped at five foot nine, the sin-eater an impressive six foot six, which explained why she found herself perched atop his wobbly shoulders, fiddling with the outdated mechanical lock while also trying to decipher the code to the damned lock.

Using magic to enthrall it open would be far more time efficient, but the imprint of her power would also serve to draw the attention of every vampire attending the bloodsucker convention currently taking place downstairs. Discovery was to be avoided at all costs, vampires, and especially the Blood Lord, were not known for playing nice with their food.

Her hands fumbled once more as the demon shifted beneath her, causing her to spin too far. Her nerves were strung taut, cold sweat stinging her eyes, her hands clammy with it, and the damned demon kept ruining her concentration.

He shifted again.

“Cass!”

“I’m sorry Mara but it’s too snug. It hurts and I’m going to pop out if I don’t adjust.”

She glared down at the addled demon over her shoulder. “What in the nine hells are you going on about… oh.”

Her gaze followed where his hand was stroking, catching sight of the tightly strained fabric at his groin.

“Sin-eater, we’re standing inside the vault of the Blood Lord himself, within a mansion overrun with blood drunk vampires. You think now’s the best time to be sporting wood?”

She couldn’t hold back the grin at the sight of his struggle, her body relaxing. “Kinky demon.”

She could see the corner of his mouth pull up in a sardonic smirk, steadying her purchase with one arm while using his free hand to tug at his waistband.

“You think my alter-ego was using his loud taste in clothing to compensate for his embarrassingly humble endowment? In the future, should I ever see anyone wandering about in flowered corduroy, I’ll feel obligated to put him out of his misery.”

Her focus returned to the deposit box, fingers back to upon the mechanism, feeling for the minute give of metal any time she'd hit the correct number in the sequence.

"You are everything merciful and benevolent…"

The rumble of his laughter sent an odd, fluttering sensation skittering through her belly, the same sensation as when he had kissed her back within that gallery. Her nose scrunching at the thought.

It's not him…

She made sure to keep her attention fixed upon the lock she was trying to pick when she next spoke.

"You did well tonight demon."

Though he would never learn the truth of the many crimes committed against him, it had satisfied her to her toes to see him put Prince of Pleasures in his place. Her Cassius would've been proud of the sin-eater tonight. She was.

There was slight give beneath her touch, another number revealed. The rising panic which the demon had helped ease with his comfort and outrageous behavior slowly turned to excitement, just a few more numbers and the box would open, and they could leave.

"Almost there..." She glanced down at him, only to find him staring up at her, an odd expression haunting those coal dark eyes. And for a brief moment she could swear she caught a flash of hellfire within those dark depths, warming his eyes into heated embers. Her chest gave a painful squeeze, the drum of her heart loud in her ears.

"Mara?"

The persistent fluttering escalated inside her belly. "Yes, Cass?"

"Want to see it?"

"See… it?" She blinked a few times, trying to recover her thoughts, awareness coming to her at the sight of his impish grin as he again adjusted himself.

"Sin, while we're here, how about you keep your big head in the game, and your small one in your pants." Even as she spoke, she could feel his strong fingers lazily trailing up her leg, making it difficult to keep her own head in the game.

"It's not small anymore Mara, besides you're to blame for my distraction." His fingers pressed into her thighs, "You and those lace bloomers. I can feel your heat against my neck..."

“Show some self respect demon, I look like Bloodsucker Barbie thanks to that transfiguration tonic. I realize there are some who might be into that kind of thing but… Hells, demon what are you doing?”

Strong hands encircled her waist, lifting her above his head as he turned her. “Quit messing about and put me down.”

Another deep-rumbled chuckle as he lowered her back onto his shoulders. “Yes Mara.”

Her greedy fingers quickly returned to the intricate lock, the lock giving slightly as the dial slid over the number four. “I think I got it 14-27-14-77. Birth and death year of Vlad the Impaler. Who would’ve suspected the Blood Lord possessed a sense of humor?”

She nearly missed the soft click of the lock mechanism releasing when she felt the flow of hot breath between her legs.

“CASS!”

Ignoring her warning hiss, his hands moved up to push aside the layers of ruffles and chiffon, strong fingers sinking into bared skin of her inner thighs, “Not the best idea demo… ahh.”

All coherent thoughts ceased when he inhaled deeply from her, as if to claim her scent. “Hmm, you smell like Mara. Dark and sweet.”

By some miracle she remembered to reach her hand inside the vault and quickly snag the safe’s singular content before instinct had her burying her own fingers into the thick length of his hair. His teeth bit into the lacy pink bloomers, scraping against her core.

“Dark gods…” Her head fell back.

“You sound like Mara.”

Liquid heat scorched her, leaving her to gasp for air when his tongue slid along the lace covering her mound.

“You taste like wine, rich and heady, intoxicating to the mind.”

Clinging to that final bit of sense she possessed, she quickly yanked the vial En-Rasputin had given her free from the chain around her neck, placing it in the safety box where the ring had been only moments earlier.

Her eyes closed when the lace of her bloomers slid aside, that last barrier between them removed, his hot breath whispering against her bared sex.

“And for as long as I’ve had you against me, you’ve been looking like my Mara…”

You’ll always be mine, amata.

Another click had them both look over in shock as the automatic door of the vault slid opened behind them.

“Good evening children.”

The Blood Lord himself stood at the entrance, his posture relaxed, unlike that of the irate Fae princess standing beside him. “Hello again Amara. Cassius.”

She looked from the Fae, back to the Vampire, then to Cass, all amusement washed out as her stomach sank.

“Uhm, this is not what it looks like!”

The vampire stepped forward, Alura instantly placing her hand on Jareth’s shoulder in warning.

“Truly? For it looks as if you both were in the process of robbing my vault.”

She felt Cassius’s shoulders shake with laughter but wasn't fast enough to cover his mouth.

“Right, then I guess it's exactly what it looks like,” he said, barely hiding his snicker.

That earned him an angered growl from both Alura and Mara. “Cass!”

“What? He figured us out, smart vampire, nothing ever gets by him,” Cass said, his words sloppy.

Alura’s angered expression switched to one of reluctant bemusement. “Is he… drunk?”

Mara nodded. “Plastered! By the way, you can let me down now demon.”

Cass looked from her to the Fae, to the Blood Lord, then back to her, shaking his head.

“No, I don't think I want to. They look mean, you’re safer up there.”

“And how am I supposed to summon a portal for us to go home from up here?”

After a few moments in which he looked to genuinely give the question some thought, he slowly lowered her down against him until her feet touched the ground.

“You know Priestess, you’re no fun when you insist on making sense. I liked it better when you weren’t thinking.”

“Uh huh, and look where that got us, caught with your hand in my cookie jar.”

His head tilted away from their company to grin down at her, while his fingers pushed the pink fabric down her hips, covering her from sight.

“Almost…”

“It would appear that both our guests are sauced.” Alura’s sweet voice was cut off by the severe tone of the vampire lord himself.

“It would serve you two imbeciles well to recall that the premises are mystically warded. Neither of you will be capable of leaving my domain unless I allow you to. For the moment I would suggest you exit my vault voluntarily, lest I lock this door behind me and leave you to rot.”

Lock her in a five-by-five cell and throw away the key

She tried to keep her face stoic, couldn’t let the vampire know how effective his threat was. But she couldn’t keep her heart from thundering in her chest, and if her hands hadn't been clenched into tight balls, she was sure they’d be trembling.

Her eyes darted to Cass, who was rubbing at his chest, his jaw clenched as he stared down the vampire. She knew him well enough to know he was about to do something reckless. Her arms crossed over her chest as she moved to place herself between the notorious Blood Lord and Cassius. With a defiant tilt of chin her gaze came to rest upon startling crimson eyes of the vampire.

The libations had left Mara feeling brazen, but it was the vampire’s imperious disposition to ultimately get the better of her senses. Pride always prevailed against better judgement.

“To tell the truth Jareth, I had rather been hoping to end this delightful evening with a bit rough play.”

“Amara don’t...” She heard Alura’s gasped warning but could no longer see the Fae when the world abruptly pivoted in place.

A rush of light filled her head, she heard a popping sound right before her ears began to ring. The sound giving birth to the worst headache she had yet experienced.

“Mara!”

Colors swam before her eyes before they all blend together, turning to pitch black. She couldn’t even tell for certain if her eyelids were opened or shut. “Cass?”

Heat radiated against her back. His sturdy frame anchoring her as she focused on silencing the ringing, to make the sensation of whirling stop. But the more she tried to subdue it, the stronger it became.

“I think perhaps the Fae blood was more potent than I gave it credit for.”

Had she managed to sound as careless as she hoped? She hadn't even been able to hear her own voice over the persistent ringing in her ears. Dark gods, it felt as if her mind would burst open from the pressure building inside her skull. The tension only lessening slightly when steady fingers closed along her nape.

He was with her still, it would be okay. But his touch also made her aware of the warm and sticky stream his fingers were sliding over, her senses picking up the familiar metallic scent.

“Blood?”

Blessedly, the ringing began to fade to the back of her mind when the pain in her head eased.

“I too enjoy it rough, Priestess. I’ve increased the pressure within your cranial arteries, the blood vessels inside your head are dilated beyond capacity. In words even you can understand, you are hemorrhaging from your brain.”

40

THOUGH WE REALLY DON'T WANT TO

"We'll come out." Defeat hit slowly, but was inescapable.

With as much care as he could, Cass held Amara up as he led her out of the vault, trying to shield her with his body.

As they moved, he whispered apologies by her ear, words only for her. Their impulsiveness had got them into this, but it was due to his reckless disregard for his own life that his Mara's life was now in danger. It was by his failure her soul was once again within reach of Namtar's grasp, served up by one furious vampire.

The office smelled similar to his own, wood polish, leather, books… intermingling with scents belonging purely to vampire.

His arms tightened around Amara as Jareth turned his back, clasping his hands together and filling his lungs. He turned back on them, his eyes magnetized to the blood still sluggishly trickling down Mara's face. He'd been scenting her blood.

Cass growled and pulled Mara behind him, letting go of the hold he had on his power. Corruption, lust… playing into the vampire's bloodlust wasn't the wisest idea, but they had no other options he could see.

"Are you attempting to unleash my primal nature, Cassius? You do not know what it is you play with."

His grip tightened on Mara, a reassuring squeeze, that he might've needed more than she did.

"Release your hold on her Jareth, or I'll set free that which you truly are, that which even you live in fear of." He pulled himself up to his full

height, stiffening his shoulders and looking down on the powerful Blood Lord.

“How many of your progeny and guests will survive the night once I break your chains and set your true self free? How many will you kill before regaining your senses from the bloodlust?”

He was suddenly immobile, flung from Mara’s side, both landing hard in chairs that he hadn’t noticed up to that point.

He struggled, trying to reach for Mara.

Protect her.

Don’t look Cass…

“NO,” he roared, fighting against mystical bonds.

“My apologies, binding spells are a crude form of magic, but I find their efficiency undeniable. You two will now sit still like good little children and let the adults take a turn to play.”

Blood stained her pink dress, the fabric blooming red, the crimson color leaching the blood from his own face.

“Mara?”

She looked over to him, out of the corner of her bleeding eyes, his chest tightened to the point where he couldn’t draw a proper breath, dizziness swarming his thoughts. They sat close enough he could’ve reached her if his arms had been free to move. Close enough he could see the blood as it beaded from her pores.

“Take me, don’t hurt her... just let her go and take me instead.” He wasn’t keeping track of the words escaping his mouth.

“They can’t break us Cass, just our bodies,” Mara said.

Or he thought she said. Was it just in his mind?

Sweat poured down his brow with the effort from trying to free himself. He couldn’t let this happen…

His mind kept slipping, thoughts and images intruding.

I promise you, one day we’ll be free.

“Teresa always did posses the most dreadful taste in attire.” Jareth moved over her, grasping Amara’s wrist as she closed her fist, holding tightly to the ring in her palm.

The ring. That’s why they were here. Had to focus.

She still had the ring. For him.

-CRACK-

Without warning, Jareth's fist flew out and slammed into her jaw, her bones shattering audibly throughout the room. The same room that suddenly began to tremble beneath them.

His power blasted out from him, ignited by his rage. The image in his mind had flames roaring up from the floor, but that wasn't right. He'd never called up hell-flames.

"You don't touch her!" he shouted, straining against the Blood Lord's magic, his power thick in the room, but not budging the bonds holding him back.

His head rang with the stunted power, rolling between reality and flashes of memories that couldn't be real.

Get her away, before… his mind raced, panic stealing his breath.

"*Every time you flinch, I'm to break another of your bones."* Basileus's voice floated up.

"You'll not touch her," he shouted, fighting to move, his body not obeying. "*Tiit Assat-sa*," he mumbled hoarsely. "She is my life."

"*Pay attention Cassius, it's lessons such as this that shape your character."*

His father was here now?

"Jareth!" Alura moved out from the shadows, voice calm, but consternation filled her narrowed gaze.

Jareth's ire banked when his eyes rested on the beautiful Fae. If rumors were to be trusted, this female was his mate, and she could temper his unreasonable nature.

Cass tried to keep his thoughts together, still fighting to free—at least his arm—he just needed to hold her hand…

"*I can feel your pain."* Whispers from his ghost calmed his pounding heart.

"She had two of my progeny murdered, attacked another and took his eye, broke into my home and attempted to steal my property. She'll receive whatever punishment I see fit for these crimes." Jareth's cold voice shook Cass back to the present.

Mara wasn't safe. It was his fault—his recklessness...

The vampire moved once again, reaching for the ring, Amara's head lolling in his direction, her defiant expression marked by a bloody and crooked smirk before she spat a mix of blood and saliva directly into his face.

She was fighting, she was strong.

Why could he hear her hoarse weeping in his mind?

Jareth raised his hand again and Cass lunged up, once more stopped short by the mystical binds.

“JAHI!” Alura shouted again, this time making a motion to intervene.

Screams of fear began to resound from downstairs as the house shook violently. With a frustrated snarl, Jareth closed his fingers over Mara’s.

-CRUNCH-

She didn’t cry out when the thin bones of her fingers snapped beneath his gasp, Cass felt her pain burning through his chest.

She was his. His to protect—

“Going to suffer in silence? Good, I abhor pitiful pleas,” Jareth said, his tone unemotional as he patted Mara on her head with his free hand before moving his fingers, prying his ring free from her hand.

“MARA,” he yelled, his throat raw—had he even stopped yelling?

“I believe this belongs to me.” Jareth plucked up the ring from her ruined hand.

Mara’s eyes came back to him, a silent apology and something more—*grief*—shone in their depths.

Blood trickled down the sides of her face, perfectly framing it. He watched a bead of it cut a trail down to her jawline, transfixed as it gathered and continued its path to her chin, where it dripped unheeded onto her crimson stained dress.

Her soft noise of pain broke the trance, he watched helplessly as her head dropped back onto the headrest, her eyes vacant.

Jareth pulled out a pocket handkerchief, and wiped his cheek, disgust clear on his face as he tossed the stained fabric into her lap and moved to stand in front of Cass.

“*They can only break our bodies…”*

He shook his head, trying to focus, every breath a struggle.

“I must thank you Demon Prince, I didn’t feel up to socializing this evening. After all, my guest of honor already arrived.”

He patted Cassius’s head before digging his strong fingers into his jaw, tilting his head up to lock eyes.

They were set up. It was all a ploy to get them here. Now Mara… his eyes darted to the side to ensure she was still breathing— she was hurt.

And all for naught. No ring to keep his father away, and a new enemy to retaliate against.

If they made it out of here alive.

“*Don’t let them catch you, I’m afraid for what they’d do.”*

The sweet voice of his Assat drew him back in, and for once, he was happy to escape to her.

“*We’ll escape, and it’ll be just you and I. You are mine.”*

“*And you’re mine.”*

His head rapped against the back of the chair, and he was forced to pay attention to the vampire who was roughly shaking him.

“Where did you hide Asmodeus, princeling? You’re over your head on that throne.”

“My throne,” he mumbled through his clenched teeth, his jaw clamped tight to keep them from chattering.

Jareth’s nail clipped the flesh of his cheek, collecting a drop of ruby blood and placing it against his tongue, greedily lapping the taste off his finger, groaning in pleasure before continuing to speak.

“Your throne... for now. We both know you’ll lose it soon enough, and I’ll see Asmodeus returned to power before this happens and your ignorance destroys the very foundation of our existence. Do you even fully comprehend the risks and consequences of your actions have exposed us to? Tell me where I can find Asmodeus.” The vampire’s voice rose, veins popping at his temples.

Did he fully understand? Better even… did he care? Anything was better than his father's rule.

Cassius smiled, oozing arrogance and cockiness.

“The King is dead, long live the King.”

Jareth's fingers dug into his scalp, turning his head to whisper an enthrallment into his ear, Cass’s mind turned to static, the last words he heard was Jareth’s dire proclamation.

“If that's how you want to play, then I wish you pleasant dreams, *King* Cassius.”

41

DIG UP AND TURN OVER

THE WHITE NOISE CLEARED UP, HIS MIND LATCHING ON TO A MEMORY OF damp cold stone and pain tearing through him. Running to the only place he felt safe.

Assat.

She was his safe haven, his strength when he faltered. He knew she suffered, though she never complained. One day, he would hold her in his arms and make her his own, when he was strong enough to free her from her cell, strong enough to finally stand up to his father.

He felt so weak and infantile for crying in front of her, but he couldn't stop. His stomach hurt so bad.

All he'd done was stop Bas. He didn't want to submit to the Prince of Pleasures anymore. He hated every moment, his body still succumbed. He was always sick after. He'd said no, Bas had pressed— of course his father had felt it the moment he'd injured his Herald.

He didn't even know if his father realized when he tossed him across the room that he'd landed against the weapon rack and that his stomach had been torn open.

He healed fast. But it hurt so bad.

He lifted his hand off his injury and tilted his head forward, so he could see down his body from his prone position. There was a sharp intake of breath from inside of the cell, and she came and sat beside the bars.

The dungeon had become his escape. In six years since he had discovered her down here, she'd become his peace.

The only place he could hide away.

He complained to her, first with a child's guileless abandon, not realizing how entitled he sounded to someone who lived in a five-by-five cell with no hope of ever seeing sunlight.

"You should have that bound," she said, slipping her arm through the bars to grab his hand. She didn't mind that it was coated in blood.

"I can feel your misery. Did he come into your room again?" Her voice, though weak, had gone dark with promise.

Another sob escaped. He was trying to stop. His insides felt like they were on fire, he had no one to take care of him...

He nodded, sniffled and ran his sleeve across his face.

"I punched him right on the mouth."

She lay down on her side of the bars, careful not to let go of his hand. Her eyes were the prettiest things he'd ever seen.

"I don't want to run." He hiccuped on a sob. "One day, I'm going to be stronger than them. I'll free you and we'll take them all down."

"Your pain. I can feel it, it's making me crave something… like when I need to eat chocolate more than anything." She sighed and took her hand from his to hold it over his wound. "It's making me dizzy."

It sounded like she was describing his own craving for lust. A nebulous thought formed. She had to be around sixteen now. Az insisted she was warlock, Cass knew she was demon born, he could scent it on her. After all, he was Prince of all the Hells—he would recognize a demon.

As a sin-eater, Prince of Lust, he hated how he had to feed. He'd barely seen eighteen years and already he'd had so many sexual partners it had become monotonous. He wouldn't wish that on her. But his need to see her strong was more than his desire to protect her.

"Do you want to try something?"

She'd been malnourished most of her life, though he and their tutor brought food regularly, it wasn't enough. If she could get energy from something other than food, she could grow strong here. She would thrive even if it were as simple as the lowest demon's ability to feed off corruption.

"What do you want to try?" she said on a sigh, her fingers pushing his hair back from his forehead, soothing him.

Az was completely in denial if he refused to see her demon blood.

He tried to roll on his side to face her, he shifted a scant inch and pain blasted through him, making sweat prickle across his brow. He gave up and let his head fall back to the rough stone floor.

"Hold my hand again." He noticed if his eyes were closed, the pain was more intense. Instead, he watched her delicate hand slide back into his and grasped it as tight as he could. He wanted to be touching her always.

"You feel it?" He asked and she nodded tightly in response.

He only hoped she couldn't sense the source of his pain. He already had enough shame. He didn't want her to know how bad it truly was. His cowardice, biting his tongue, nodding his head, letting stuff happen... the kinds of things he let happen.

"Now imagine you're breathing it in, letting it wrap around the very particles of your being." He watched her. It was better than thinking. "Like the feeling of that first sip of water when you haven't had any in days, feeling it run through your body, spreading through your insides…"

She moaned and arched her back. He knew it wasn't a sexual response, but his body was so attuned to hers, his erection hardened so fast he got light headed. Her scent… he craved it so fiercely. Her lips—just to feel them once.

She groaned again and turned her head towards him, blinking open her eyes. "I understand."

Cass nodded, his cheeks flaming, praying she wouldn't look down.

"Cass," she said on a rush of breath. "I could feast off you forever."

She fed off his pain, freeing him of it and his body relaxed, lust taking over.

He stifled a groan. "I should go before Az discovers I've snuck away."

Her brows drew together, her lips pursed into a scowl. His thumb went to her mouth, a response so conditioned it was reflex, and brushed across it.

Wishing it was his mouth. His tongue. He choked back a groan.

"It's okay if you want to take care of that here." Her now glowing eyes wandered down his body to the obvious bulge in his pants.

They didn't discuss sex with each other, both avoiding the subject, though it was there, between them in every breath they shared. He needed her. One day, she would be his. Assat-shi. His wife.

Az never left them alone together. As though they could manage to do anything with six inches of bars separating them.

“I wouldn’t mind.” She pressed closer to the bars and trailed her fingers down his side. “Do it. I want to see.” She huffed out an exasperated breath. “I can’t reach.”

He eased his hand down, another wave of pain blasting through him with the movement, another hiss of pleasure from her. She was still feeding off him—his pain coming in waves, and washing right through into her.

“I’ll be able to understand the stories now.”

She looked him over, knowledge shining in her gaze.

She couldn’t know what he had to do...

He could feel her eyes on him.

He untied his pants and reached his hand down, wrapping it around himself, shaking with pain—he could sense her lust now, and it was driving him mad.

Her hand reached as far as it could, tugging at one side of his pants, and despite the agony of every shifting movement, he used his other hand to ease them down.

“Your pain…” she moaned huskily, and his erection throbbed.

He slid his hand up and down slowly, her hand gripping his other arm, claws digging in.

“Yes.” He grunted, speeding up his movement. “Harder.”

Her tiny claws dug in deeper, her breaths no more than pants, his body one pulsing ache. None of it distracting his impending orgasm in the slightest.

How had he never felt her lust before? How would he ever go back...

“Mm, yes… I’m gonna…” He groaned.

“Yes. Yes, do it.” She growled back.

And he came.

Blinding waves of ecstasy overriding the pain wracking him. He fell back, breaths sawing in and out, her claws still embedded into his arm.

“By all the Hells, Cassius.” A voice hissed out from the shadows, followed by a higher demon, one that oozed with power—his tutor. Forever keeping them from being alone together.

“What are you doing down here?” The demon yanked him to his feet and Cass nearly crumbled with the pain of it.

“Stop Aza, can’t you see he’s injured?” Her lovely voice shouted, angry on his behalf.

He grabbed up his pants, trying to jerk free of the demon's grasp— he needed her.

"You can't do stuff like that with her." The demon gestured down Cass's body. "She's young and doesn't understand."

"I understand," she whispered, her face against the bars, her arm pushed through and reaching for him.

"You're playing right into their hands, little fool. She was put here for a reason, until we figure out why, getting attached is not an option," the demon hissed, giving Cass a hard shake.

Cass looked over to her, saw the sadness flash in her eyes before she turned from him.

"She's going to be my wife, Az. Don't dare make her feel shame for this. The only reason we aren't married is because she's still in this cell. I want her freed." Cass pulled himself up to his newly towering height.

"Rash young Prince." Azadiel pulled him back from her cell. "You can't say things like that. If they hear you speak such, you'll be signing her execution. She's not for you."

He looked back to her, the color of her eyes burning an unreal shade of turquoise.

Cass rather thought she was perfect for him. Made for him.

"*She haunts your soul, self-proclaimed king, and yet your mind is blank of these memories."* Jareth's cold voice jarred him out of his memories, but didn't release him from the thrall his mind was locked in. "*How very peculiar, perhaps corruption has maddened you, as it did your father?"*

He roared in his mind, cursing the vampire. He had NO RIGHT to those memories, certain that they were no delusions. They had felt too real to be fiction, the pain, the shame, the pleasure… her. He heard their voices echoing, his power surfacing once more, and once more his mind rolled, oblivion beckoning.

Memories kept flashing, he kept fighting the vampire's hold on his mind, his own power ensuring he didn't sink into one as deeply as that last. His body still throbbed with the remnants of pain—and betrayal. His mind roared with it.

Only one female he knew with that color eyes.

She knew. She hadn't told him.

"S*he is not for you*." The demon's voice echoed from the memory.

Impossible. They were bound by oath to one another.

“Ah ah, princeling,” the vampire whispered across his thoughts. “Show me where your father is, and I’ll release you.”

His body was vibrating with power, burning through the numbness of the alcohol, feeling off-kilter from the addition of Fae blood. His control…slipping.

He could scent… her, the vampire was just a cold void in his mind. Rifling through it as though it were a trash heap and he was looking for treasure.

“Mara.” He was trying to speak, not sure if it was working.

She kept that from him? Had it been her, or had he succumbed completely to madness?

“No,” the vampire responded. “Asmodeus. Where is your father, princeling? Where have you hidden him away?”

Cass’s thoughts locked on his father at the suggestion.

“*You’re all I have now*.” His father was standing over him, speaking with pity all over his expression. “*Born of a vessel barely worthy of my seed.”*

Then he was trapped, his father’s hand around his throat as his other hand landed against his face. The pain of it making his eyes water. Then he was a young boy, landing in a heap against the wall as his father’s fist made contact.

The memories were flashing in snippets, out of sequence—this was not how any of those times had been…

Cassius’s mind folded once more, and he found himself standing behind his father, facing off an Archangel that shone with as much brightness as his father seeped dark.

Asmodeus was trapped in a celestial sigil, keeping him locked in place, and Cass out. Not that he had wanted to reach him. This was it, the day of his father’s reckoning. A culmination of nearly a century of herding him towards his end.

“I don’t like that it has come to this, brother,” the angel spoke, and Cass was startled to see the respect on its face. “I don’t understand why you would seek to collapse the realms. We thought you were satisfied.”

Anger vibrated from his father, but there was no recourse, nothing he could say to redeem himself. Words were meaningless measured against the proof the celestial courts had been presented with. Still, he kept his

chin high and never spoke a word. Something inside of Cass was feeling similarly like… guilt.

“When you realize your mistake,” Asmodeus spoke slowly, “I’ll expect groveling.” He turned to Cassius and looked him over, slowly, taking everything in. “Find your strength, son. You’re all I have left.”

There was a blinding flash and Asmodeus was gone, and Cass was left with the angel.

“Where did you send my father?” Cass swallowed and avoided its eyes.

“He has been banished into a prison realm from which even he cannot escape, young prince.” The angel swept over into a bow. “Or should I say, King.”

42

OH, YOU HEARD ABOUT THAT?

PAIN RADIATED THROUGH HER IN WAVES, THE BROKEN BONES IN HER HAND scraping against muscle and nerves, but that excruciating pressure inside her skull had blessedly eased, which allowed her to think.

A quick twitch of the fingers of good hand confirmed she was regaining control over her movements. Excellent. Next, she tried to lift her head back up, the world instantly spinning on its axis before slowly coming to a halt.

Everything inside her screamed for her to close her eyes and rest, just for a moment. Instead she forced her eyes to remain open, searching for the demon while focusing on the whispered argument between the vampire and Gwynn's sister.

Jareth was standing behind the demon, his classically handsome features warped as if caught mid transition into his true vampire form. His cheekbones were too pronounced to be human, forehead too high, crimson eyes sharp and luminous, but what really gave the game away was the dagger shaped fangs extended along his bottom lip.

"I've obtained the information I required. The young king's mind folded like a house of cards, but you already knew that would happen," he turned back to face her, knowing he had her attention.

"The number of crimes you've committed against me warrant your death, but as Alura reminds me, killing either of you will bring war to my family."

Amara stopped listening to the vampire, all her attention on the demon to her side as he softly began to mumble in Sumerian, her language, emotion raw in every word.

“Assat-shi, you were made for me…”

Dark gods no, don’t let him remember…

Fear threatened to overturn the calm she had forced upon herself. The vampire had just admitted at having been inside Cassius mind. What damage had he done amongst those precious ruins?

Self awareness was a danger to a mind which had been reprogrammed, his mind would shatter without a soul to anchor him, ignorance of his own fate the only thing saving him from breaking. If Jareth unearthed memories buried beneath the rubble of his past, the stubborn demon would try to remember, to re-build—

“Release your hold on him this instant.” The words were no more than a hiss from between clenched teeth, her fear feeding the building rage.

“Now, priestess. Do you really think you have *any* say in the matter*?”* Jareth said as he turned to his desk and poured himself a drink.

Amara seethed, she needed that vial in Cass’s pocket. She’d set things in motion, a fall-back plan in case plans went awry. But at no time had she given thought to the possibility they would be unable to touch one another.

“Sin,” she hissed, getting no response. “Sin, I need you.”

“Won’t ever leave you...” his words were mumbled and broken, but she understood and her heart squeezed tight once more.

“Just call the guards, they can spend the night in the cells until some of their ambassadors arrive to search for them.” Jareth was still arguing with Alura.

Blood turned to ice at the mention of a cell, her lungs already refusing to expand. Summons and prison cells, either had the power to plummet her into a useless state of anxiety. She would see this mansion and every vampire within it burned to the ground before she was ever again locked away.

“I’ll send word for your brother to come and get her, but I’m not agreeing to releasing the boy.” Jareth blustered, and Mara prickled.

Like hells she would be leaving him behind at the mercy of the Blood Lord. Now would have been a good time for the sin-eater to remember he could summon up a hell-gate. But he appeared to be lost inside his own mind.

With Jareth’s thrall eased and having regained control over her body, Amara slowly slid out of her chair. With a hard swallow she forced down the instinctual yelp of pain as bone scraped along nerve in her hand, all the while watching to ensure the vampire was still caught up in his discussion. Carefully, since the blood loss had left her weaker and woozier than anticipated, she shuffled closer to Cass’s chair.

His hand was colder than hers, his face ashen. If she hadn’t heard his racing heart, she’d have thought the worst. Judging by the pain throbbing through her face, she likely didn’t look much better.

She dug in his jacket pocket, then the other, finally finding what she was searching for in the inside pocket, tucked away with care. Cass had always been thoughtful like that.

Giving into compulsion Amara rested her aching cheek on his leg for a brief moment, trying to comfort the demon while gathering the strength to get back to her chair and pretend that she hadn’t left it. She was tired, so very tired and dizzy. How much blood had she lost?

Her hands fumbled with the lid of the tiny vial. Open it, get close enough…

“You can’t tell me the prophecy isn’t about the two of them,” Alura was shouting, had she been any other than the vampire’s mate he would likely have killed her for that.

“Even more reason we should end their lives, that prophecy speaks of the apocalypse!”

“It speaks of a rebirth, or did you glance over the part that mentions enslavement? I won’t see the Fae or vampires fall to such a fate. Set them free Jareth.”

The sound of Alura’s voice was coming closer. She rather liked Alura, she was useful. And since the Fae was making an effort to get them free, Amara guessed she ought to be feeling sorry for what she was about to do. Unfortunately for the princess, she wasn’t exactly in a remorseful mood.

The fingers of her uninjured hand gripped tightly around the small vial, clenching her teeth to stay silent as she moved her other hand to grasp on to Cass’s. This had better work.

When she felt a female hand close over her shoulder, Amara pushed her thumb against the stopper of the tiny vial.

“Stay back from her Alura,” Jareth shouted. Causing Alura to jump and Amara to perk up to see why he hadn’t just grabbed the woman.

He held a phone in hand, one still attached to a cord on his desk. “She’s viperous.” Jareth spoke some frantic words into the phone before slamming it down and lunging for them.

Too late, vampire. She popped the top off the vial, and with a subdued hiss, the liquid within turned to gas as it was exposed to air, ready to react with the toxin that had been pre-laced into the Fae’s favored perfume.

Asurim’s main export consisted of poisons, oils and perfumes sold on every market within the realms. She had scented the familiar fragrance on Alura last they had met. With a little prodding En-Rasputin had soon discovered which vendor serviced Alura’s maids, who faithfully ordered perfumes to scent the fabrics of their mistress’s gowns. By her order, the last order had been laced with iron powder, a metal the Fae were notoriously allergic to. The substance would’ve remained inactive, harmless, unless exposed to an agitator. The one Amara had just released.

Alura stood in front of her in a combative stance, coughing once. Then again. Her coughing turned into a fit and she slowly crumpled forward, coughing and wheezing, hands at her neck.

“Warlock whore!” Jareth roared, grabbing her head up by her hair. “What have you done to my wife?”

Despite the pain tearing at her scalp, Amara smiled. The broken bone of her cheek only allowing for a crooked grin as she hissed out her demand.

“Release us, and I’ll tell you where I hid the antidote.”

“Tell me or I’ll kill the boy king here and now,” Jareth shouted, right in her face before dropping her and wrapping his hands around Cass’s neck.

She stumbled onto the wooden floor, her legs too weak to support her body.

“Let him go.” Blood and spittle flew from her mouth as she fought to regain her footing. “Cassius wake up. I warn you Jareth, lay one more finger on him and I’ll let your wife die. Count on it to be slow and painful.”

Was she truly ready to risk captivity and death for the sake of her demon’s life?

Yes.

“Mara,” Cass mumbled, his gleaming eyes blinking open and magnetizing right to hers. “Mara you’re hurt.” His brows drew together,

his next words choked off as the vampire’s hands tightened around his neck.

“She’ll die unless you let him go,” her voice grew pitched with anxiety, even as she tried to keep her tone even.

She didn’t want Alura to die, she just wanted the sin-eater out of this realm and away from the Blood Lord. Needed him safe, the rest was negotiable.

Jareth spun, and in the moment it took her to blink, he had her hauled up to his chest, fangs bared.

“No,” Cass shouted and jumped to his feet, blue flames licking down his body as the room trembled around them. “Let her go, keep your hands off her.”

His gaze was vacant, his head shaking as though trying to shake off a horrible sight. His sigil on her palm burned with an intensity she hadn’t sensed before, something was very wrong. Whatever he was seeing, it didn’t belong inside his mind. It belonged to the past, to *her* Cassius.

“What did you do to him?” Mara whispered, struggling to break free of Jareth’s grasp.

Alura’s coughing fit ended and she collapsed on the floor. Jareth instantly discarding her to scoop his wife into his arms. Touching, really. She might even care if she weren’t so focused on getting back to the demon.

“Pin you with my sword through your throat and rip you limb from limb as you watch,” Cass was mumbling, rage plain on his face, his foe invisible to the rest of them.

“The antidote, warlock.” Jareth called out, “and you can both leave freely.”

“Vow it, vampire. Make it a binding oath!”

A burst of power flew out of the demon, knocking them all flat, blue flames surrounding him in the shape of wings, his body surrounded by traceries that floated off him in wisps and disappeared. The power streaming off him so thick in the room it was hard to breathe.

Her eyes widened as a hell-gate sprang to life, a full visual of the heart of the Nessus inside. It started sucking Cass in, she lunged for him. Her way out...

Then it was gone. He was gone. The roaring noise, that she hadn’t even noticed until it stopped, gone.

He’d left her here. Just like Ghata’n.

With a huff, she collapsed on her back, trying to regain her breath, only to be dragged to her feet by a vampire on the verge of insanity, and tossed into a chair. Her chair. If she were the sentimental type, she might start forming an attachment.

“Antidote. Now. Or I’ll kill you.” Jareth no longer looked in the mood to negotiate.

“Antidote for the ring.” But you couldn’t blame a girl for trying.

“Ring or your life,” Jareth snarled.

“You won’t be killing her today, Jareth.” Shadows swamped the room, preceding the entry of the Dark King of the Fae. Her lover. Brother to the female she’d just poisoned.

“She’s poisoned Alura,” Jareth snarled, still looking into Mara’s eyes.

“Not to kill her,” Gwynn said, stepping up beside Jareth and removing his hands from her. His gaze took in every injury, while Amara took in every tick of his jaw. The Fae King was angry. “Right, Amara?”

She sighed, finally breathing easier. If anyone could take on the ancient vampire, it was the equally ancient, and just as mad, Huntsman.

“She’ll be sick for a very long time.” She spoke to Gwynn, deciding to ignore the vampire. “I’ve heard inhaling iron can be very painful.”

“Lura?” Gwynn knelt beside Mara, looking toward his sister. “Are you in pain?”

Alura wheezed out a near-chuckle, “get her out of my home.”

Gwynn ran his hand down her hair, rubbing it between his fingers, his ice blue eyes swirling with gold. Great. Now she had to deal with a loopy Dark King. Back to a fifty-fifty chance at dying tonight, still good, she’d faced worse odds.

“And you have the antidote with you, do you not?” Gwynn turned to Amara, his thumb rubbing at a trail of blood which had been dripping down her chin. Bliss. It had been itching like mad.

She notched her chin and clenched her jaw, immediately regretting it when it sent another wave of pain shooting through her temples, the instinctual head jerk turning her world into a not very merry-go-round.

“I left it in place of the ring,” she whispered, not wanting to stir up that ache in her head again.

“See, Blood Lord, a mere misunderstanding.” Gwynn nodded and scooped her into his arms.

“The ring,” Mara hissed out. “Or I come back for it with an army.”

Jareth bellowed so loud the books vibrated on their shelves. “You broke into my house. You poisoned my wife. I didn’t get what I needed from the Demon Prince.” Jareth was snarling right in her face again, but she was tucked safely into the arms of one of the most powerful beings in the realms. “And you expect me to let you leave with what you broke in here for?”

Amara looked him dead in the eye and muttered the only answer she had for him. “Yes.”

Gwynn’s arms tightened around her, the only indication that she had perhaps crossed a line.

“Just give it to her, Jahi.” Alura’s voice was weak, but loud enough to capture the vampire’s attention. “We’ve no use for it, unlike you I feel no loyalty for its creator.”

“It’s *mine*,” Jareth roared, and if the woman on the floor hadn’t been wasting in the grips of a painful neurotoxin, Amara might’ve thought she just rolled her eyes at her husband. Probably a twitch.

With a growl, Jareth slammed the ring back into her broken hand, his face red and fangs deadly sharp.

“Get her the fuck out of my house,” he said running into his vault.

Gwynn leaned down, with her in arms, to brush a kiss across his sister’s forehead. “I’ll come back once you’ve rested, we have things to discuss,” he whispered.

She felt the shift into shadows, no longer dragged down by the weight of gravity, nor hindered by form, and relaxed into the Huntsman’s arms.

“Let’s get you home so I can heal you.” His voice whispered through her mind.

Safe for now. Funny how she’d forgotten what that felt like.

43

AGAIN WITH THE LEAVING BEHIND

"NO!" HE SHOUTED, AS THE PORTAL SWALLOWED HIM, TAKING HIM AWAY from her. "Mara!"

He came through into his throne room, roaring, chest heaving, blue flames arching from his back and over his sides. Jez jumped up from his throne and ran forward, grabbing Cass by the shoulder and steering him down halls and into his bedroom.

He blanked again and blinked open his eyes to Jez standing in front of him, hands on his shoulders.

"Breathe, Cass," Jez was saying, voice low and even.

The calm touch of the angel was warming his chest. His power was flooding back into his synapses, he sadly noted that the wings were gone. Had they been real or just a manifestation of his imagination? He'd always wanted wings like his father's...

"You're bleeding." Jez licked his thumb and swiped it across his lip. "You need to calm down."

His heart still hammered. "I have to go back for her." He couldn't catch his breath, dark spots floated across his vision, his head ringing.

When he opened his eyes again, he was laying on his sofa, Jez sitting in front angled toward him.

"Do you have it back under control?" Jez asked carefully.

He took a deep breath. Yes, he finally was. He nodded and squeezed his eyes closed.

Jez tapped his cheek until his eyes opened. “Don’t you ever. Put me. Through. Shit like that. Again.” Jez snarled at him, eyes lighting up.

His Herald must’ve picked up the power fluxes and emotional rollercoaster he’d just been on. It worked both ways, Jez’s calm healing energy flooded his body, and he could finally take a deep breath.

“Jez.” Cass swiped his hand down the angel’s wing, making Jez still completely. “Thank you.”

Cass moved to sit on his balcony, staring blankly out at the sea of pit fiends fighting for dominance, Jez standing behind him, hands resting on his shoulders. He could feel the heat radiating off the angel’s chest, warm and soothing to his overly sensitized body.

That last epic burst of power had left his body feeling like a giant exposed nerve. His head was throbbing, at the same time it was screaming for him to go back. He’d left her there. He couldn’t gather his thoughts, they were scrambled and confusing his imaginings of his ghostly wife with that of his very real priestess. Perhaps the Blood Lord had tipped him over the edge into insanity. Is this how it began?

Jez’s hands squeezed his shoulders.

“Angling to get in my bed?” Cass mumbled. The first words he’d spoken in some time.

Jez slapped him upside the back of his head and everything inside of him flinched.

“Don’t be a dick, Cassius,” Jez laughed, then his hands slid from Cass’s shoulders. “Shit. I’m sorry.” Jez came around to stand in front of him, blocking his view of a particularly gory fight.

The angel went to his knees in front of him, placing his hand on Cass’s now pounding chest. “I shouldn’t have hit you.”

Cass shrugged and lay his head back. Fuck he was wiped out. Tired wasn’t even the word for it.

“You call that a hit?” He snorted lightly, smirk fully in place.

“Yeah that’s not even remotely funny,” Jez said, sitting back on his heels. “I saw you after your father was done with you.”

He lifted his head to look at the angel’s stern face. “I’m sorry you had to see that. I thought I was done with that.”

“You need to fight back,” Jez said, scowling.

“I have to go back for her.” Cass clenched his jaw tight and tried to pull himself up.

“You want to go back—to a situation you barely crawled away from?”

“*Leave without me… I’m only slowing you down.”*

Was it Mara? Was it his ghost? His mind and memories could no longer be trusted.

“The Priestess and I,” Cass glared back, “have an agreement. We’re bound, and I’m not leaving her in danger.”

“You need to stabilize yourself. You’re like a void of power—an event horizon sucking everything into a black hole. Cass you’re draining me dry and I couldn’t even tell you where it’s all going.” Jez stood and tugged Cass to his feet. “I don’t know how you fix that, but you need to.”

“Took a couple sacrifices to fill the void last time.” Cass looked down at his hands, still seeing traceries of blue when he moved them too fast. His power was a greedy fiend, searching out sustenance. He needed sacrifices from the warlocks, or a visit to his harem… and that thought made him queasy.

“You… killed people?” Jez stopped walking, his grip on Cass’s hand tightening.

Cass looked back at him, mouth pulled into a tight line. “Well I didn’t use my own hands. They were just sacrificed in my name.”

No, he didn’t dirty his hands, Amara had done it for him. He’d noticed how the tips of her fingers were stained a permanent red from the lives she took, and had never given it a second thought. He shrugged and pulled at Jez’s hand. The angel still wasn’t moving.

Cass looked back, taking in Jez’s paleness.

“Good people?” Jez asked.

“They used to be anyway,” Cass said with a shrug. “I’m a demon Jez. Souls are sustenance to this realm, the Nessus feeds on them. Corruption and sin are the best way for me to access that, but the bottom line is the actual souls are an on-going feast. They come to these realms and their belief is solidified, their corruption constant…”

“You keep their souls?” Jez’s jaw dropped as he jerked back, trying to pull his hand from Cass’s.

“Nine Hells, Jez. What did you think being a Demon King entailed?”

Jez bared his teeth at him. “A lot of fucking and whining so far.”

Cass dropped his hand. “You came here at a bad time.”

“Have you ever had a good time?” Jez sneered, his eyes lit up.

Cass stepped closer, snarling in his face. “More good times than you have holy boy.” He looked him up and down, his palm shoving at the angel’s chest.

Jez snarled right back. “Just because I don’t make a sport out of fucking every willing female to walk.”

“I don’t know any other way!” Cass shouted, his breaths coming faster.

Jez’s eyes turned bleak. “Get your head out of your ass and find one.” He shouted back.

“Are we interrupting?” Levistus walked in the room, followed by Leira who was carrying food, both looking between Cass and the angel.

They were chest to chest, both breathing heavily, right in each other’s faces. Yeah it probably looked bad.

Lust erupted from the Erinyes, Cass took it all in, his power still seeking out more—buried deep within, he found Levistus’s wrath; so vast Cass could feast on it and it would still be burning.

Jez was roughly shaking him, he blinked his eyes, finally focusing. Levistus and Leira were both sitting on the settee, slumped over.

“Don’t. You. Ever. Feed. On. Me. Again,” Levistus growled.

Cass held up his hands. “I didn’t realize…”

“Take the girl and feed, boy, before this gets out of control.” Levistus stood slowly, testing his balance.

Cass looked at Leira, pale and still, her eyes still blazing.

“I can’t feed from her.” He ran his hand across the back of his neck, stepping closer to Jez. “I’ll kill her. It’s happened…”

Jez put his hand on Cass’s back, and Cass leaned into him. For support. No other reason.

“He needs sacrifices.” Jez spoke for him.

Levistus pressed his fingers to his forehead. “I suppose my warning to stay away from the Priestess will go unheeded.”

“I made a promise.” Cass shook his head then looked up. “She’s mine.” He growled, “and I’m going to go claim what’s mine.”

“Cassius there are things you need to know.” Levistus’s words were cut off when Cass lunged at him. “Fine!” He backed up. “Go let her lick your wounds. I’m *advising* you to keep your head about you. And don’t have sex with her.” Something flashed in Levistus’s eyes, slowing Cass’s urgency.

He closed his eyes and veered toward the Erinyes instead, tipping up her chin with his fingertips. “I’ll be back for you. Stay?”

She nodded, her breath hesitating.

Cass pressed a quick kiss to her lips, being careful to restrain his hunger, then stalked out of the room and through the closest portal.

44

WELL THAT WAS A COMPLETELY WRONG TURN

THE PORTAL DIDN'T TAKE HIM TO THE PRIESTESS. OF COURSE, HIS POWERS were still out of whack, so for an entire stretched-out moment he blamed himself for the wrong turn.

Until he walked into an all-familiar office and saw his father lounging in front of a blazing hearth, contemplating the drink in his hand. His power, that had until this moment been subdued to a low-level hum, roared back to life, the waves of electric blue once more roiling over his skin, fed from whatever source was acting as his father's life support in this pocket realm.

"Did the son finally come to end the father?" Asmodeus said, circling the ice in his glass before finally looking up, then did a double-take and jumped to his feet.

Cass flinched back from his father's quick approach, before steeling himself and standing his ground.

"I didn't come here—you brought me."

"What have you done?" Asmodeus reached over Cass's shoulder, Cass hissing sharply at the burning ache his touch caused.

He looked over his shoulder and saw those same electric looking wings. Not just a hallucination?

"I drank some Fae blood..." Cass stepped back from his father's touch, the pain akin to someone prodding at a raw nerve.

Asmodeus shook his head. "I have no idea why you would be drinking blood, but that isn't what caused these."

Cass dropped his head. “I thought I was hallucinating.”

“My former brother has visited.” Asmodeus stepped back and went to refill his drink, silently offering Cass one as well. He accepted to be polite, merely sipping it. “You’ve caused quite a stir in the higher realms. Binding yourself to a celestial.”

He took in Cass’s pseudo wings again. “Sharing powers with one. And now I understand the concern. You shouldn’t have wings. What powers have you given him when you made him your Herald?”

Cass took a larger mouthful of his drink. His father probably knew more than he did. He thought it was just a mind-link thing.

“If there’s an uproar in the celestial courts, enough of one that they deign to visit me, you can be assured every realm in the Hells is plotting your downfall. Making a celestial—one so recently fallen he still has his angelic qualities—your Herald? Making someone as rash and guileless as Levistus your advisor? I’m merely wondering who’ll be the one to take my throne from you, boy.”

“I’m making allies,” Cass stubbornly retorted.

“You need a better handle on your enemies.” Asmodeus looked at him intently.

“Who’s my mother?” Cass was feeling just ballsy enough to ask. “Andrus brought her up and I am curious about a few things.”

Asmodeus lifted his lip into a sneer. “And you’re meddling in the affairs of lesser gods.”

Cass shrugged. “I’m friends with his wife. Again, making allies.” He finished his drink and narrowed his eyes on his father. “Who is she?”

“You’d best let that rest. She left you, remember?” Asmodeus turned his back, before Cass could read the emotion on his face.

“So you say.” Cass walked over to the side table and refilled his own drink, feeling completely refreshed.

“Summon Glasya here.” Asmodeus stepped up beside him.

Cass stiffened. He hadn’t seen his sister since their blow-up over Levistus.

“Why would I do that?” He frowned, his hand tightening around his glass.

“Your power needs to be tempered. You’re leaning more to the celestial, and that won’t go over well with the other Archdeacons. So, you’ll bind your powers to your sister’s.”

Cass’s jaw and hand clenched hard. “I won’t.”

“You will, or my throne will be lost.” Asmodeus took a menacing step closer. “Summon her, or I siphon back all the power you just fed off here.”

His power was satiated for once, his thoughts once more sensible, with his head no longer spinning he realized there wasn’t much of a choice. He was trapped in a realm that was completely controlled by his father, at his whim and mercy. Summon Glasya, then his father would release him, he could leave and continue on to see Amara all the faster.

He drew a small circle, with a wicked chuckle to himself thinking of his sister trapped in it, then sketched out Glasya’s sigil and called her forth. She appeared in a silk robe, looking furious. Horror dawning as she took in her surroundings, her eyes widening at the sight of Asmodeus.

She dropped to her knees, her head bowing with reverence.

“Father,” she whispered, then looked up at him with suspiciously glassy eyes.

Asmodeus motioned for Cass to break the circle, sidestepping him as soon as he swiped a clean break, grabbed Glasya by her hands, lifted her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. And now it was Cass’s turn to look on in horror. His father *hugged?*

“I want you to bind your power to Cassius’s.” Asmodeus kept his hands on her shoulders and greedily took in her face.

Glasya’s expression went cold. “He’s tainted.”

She turned her steel blue eyes on Cass, looking at him for the first time since she’d stepped through. Her eyes widened again— reminding Cass he still had those weird wing things showing.

“Exactly,” Asmodeus said. “He needs his power secured to the infernal.”

Glasya scoffed. “He can go become blood brothers with Mephistopheles. I don’t want that tainted shit affecting my own power.”

Asmodeus let out an actual growl, and Glasya stiffened, pinning a murderous glare on Cassius, then spun on Asmodeus.

“Seriously, father. My power can’t compete with his to begin with. You know this, or it would be me sitting on that throne. Why would I want to bind myself to him when I’ll just be overtaken?” She stomped her foot. “Again, you show favoritism to him.”

Asmodeus’s lids lowered, his eyes still glowing with anger and promise.

“Speaks the girl who allowed him to banish you from my court,” Asmodeus spoke coldly, each word cutting, as intended. “My children will present themselves as a team. No more hodgepodge collection of allies. I want my lineage secured.”

Cass snorted and Asmodeus shifted toward him. Cass flinched back, knowing his benevolence toward his daughter did not extend to himself.

“You have no heirs to speak of, you’re thinning your essence, and you have the nerve to scoff at me for wanting this? If,” his father said, his tone implying he believed it was more ‘when’, “they find a way to take the throne from you, Cassius, I want Glasya to be the natural choice for succession.”

Cass clenched his hands into fists. “I don’t plan on being overthrown.”

Asmodeus chuckled deeply, with true humor. “Ah, there’s my arrogance.” From one breath to the next, his humor vanished. “Bind yourselves.”

As one, he and Glasya crossed their arms over their chests.

“I refuse to be in service of him while he has that pig,” she spat out the word, “as his advisor.”

“Cassius will keep his pet leashed, or you end him.” Asmodeus shrugged off her concern. His expression was impassive, lacking the heat Cass would’ve expected toward Levistus.

“No one is ending Levistus.” Cass glowered. “He’s under my protection.” He felt his power flare again, bursting from his shoulder blades, his energy wings brightening.

“Then I am drawing up a pact here and now, giving Glasya access to the Nessus, and you access to the Malbolge. You’ll make a formal proclamation that you are allies, and those loyal to each shall fall in line.”

Cass and Glasya shared a disgruntled look. As alternatives went, this was acceptable. On paper, they could be one thing, he wasn’t going to let it dictate his actions.

His father sat at his desk with quill and parchment, using his own blood as ink, as was the norm in demonic contracts. With a flourish he wrote out the terms and signed his own name as witness, handing off the quill to Glasya first, leaving Cass to stew in his anger.

When Asmodeus handed him the quill, he didn’t immediately let it go, his eyes searching Cass’s.

“Stop sharing your powers with the Archangel,” Asmodeus hissed out, “and put those things away. I didn’t turn my back on my heritage to have it showing up in my children.”

He made a shallow slice in his palm with the penknife on the desk, cupped his palm and let the blood pool before snatching up the quill, all the while concentrating on pulling his power back into his body. By the time he no longer felt the sensitivity of the air brushing against his magically created wings, his hands were trembling with the influx.

He scratched out his signature and immediately felt the bind of the contract.

Asmodeus took back the quill and parchment, waving the thick vellum around to dry the blood before rolling it up and stuffing it into a case.

“Now then. If you ever banish Glasya from the Nessus again, I have the right to return.” Asmodeus gave Cass a sly grin and Cass’s stomach turned. “So thank you for creating a loophole. Have fun and play nice with your sister.”

Cass stumbled back, looking between Glasya and his father, she looked just as shocked as he felt, but her smug little grin was telling.

There was about to be trouble from that end. She would ensure it.

“Leave me to visit with Glasya.” Asmodeus grasped his shoulder and steered him back to the gate Cass used.

One he’d created?

He stepped through and it felt like stepping over a fold of the Hells. Then another. Hellfire burned around the outline of the portal, but the opening just kept leading to a new layer. He was like an accidental tourist of his own Kingdom.

He was doing this. Crudely cutting a gateway through the Hells.

And he was really fucking lost.

45

ALL THAT FUSS

GWYNN HAD SEEN HER SAFELY RETURNED TO ASURIM, HAD EVEN STOOD BY as En-Rasputin and his huddle of rot drinkers treated her injuries. A tincture diluted from the blood of a phoenix had helped restore the blood volume she'd lost and aided the generation of whatever vessels had been damaged.

Under the potion master's care and the Dark Fae's watchful eyes she healed without issues, her mind, however, was a mess. Emotions and memories which ought to have remained buried in the shallow grave beside her heart had risen fully from their resting place, haunting her.

The Huntsman stayed with her during the night, had slept peacefully in her arms, her body healing while using her power to help anchor his wayward mind. Only his fated one could truly break his curse and free him from this madness, and he'd made no effort in finding her, had asked for Mara's help instead. She would do all she could to spare Gwynn from further descending into that abyss.

Together they were two cursed beings, bound by an odd friendship, holding each other back from succumbing to their tragic fate.

When she was rid of Namtar and the Nessus was secured, once vengeance was attained and she was truly free, maybe then there would be a future for them. She would be loyal and care for him. He would be a good Sarrum to her people, and keep them safe. It wouldn't be perfect, it wouldn't be love, but it could be good.

As it tended to do, her mind wandered to the sin-eater, worried about what kind of damage the Blood lord had inflicted upon his mind. Guilt churned through her gut, she should've gone alone as originally intended, instead they'd walked straight into a trap—set for him.

Part of her wanted to take off to check on him the moment her legs would carry her weight, but she'd needed to heal. So after a night's rest she was once more headed for the portal to Hell.

Knowing the sin-eater, she would likely be stepping into the Nessus to find the demon lazing about within the safety of his library turned bedroom, buried balls deep inside a demoness or two. She really wanted to not worry about him and leave the demon to his own devices, especially after he'd abandoned her in a bad situation, again.

It's not him. He owed her nothing, and she was nothing to the sin-eater.

Still, she had promised *her* Cassius that she would look after the demon for him. And the knowledge that the Blood Lord had done something to his mind gave cause for concern, and wouldn't be eased until she knew the extent of the damage done.

"I am not going because I care for him, I am going out of concern for him."

She scrunched her nose even as she repeated the mantra, the words tasting acrid upon her tongue. Still she forced herself to repeat them.

The heady scent of incense, sex and blood permeated through the temple, enveloping her as she hurried down dark corridors and passed galleries of colorful cathedral windows.

"I am not going out of care for him, I am solely going out of concern… oh who the hells am I kidding?"

She fucking cared. That was maybe an even more dangerous turn of events than attending a vampire soiree had been.

Once Amara reached the portal she stepped through without hesitation, and marched directly into the comfort of the sin-eater's private sanctuary. She grinned, recalling his tendency for falling asleep with his nose buried within the pages of big and boring looking books.

The room was dark, the only light spilling from a small fire burning low inside the hearth. The scent of leather-bound books and the bite of dark magic mixed in the air, disguising the light musk of arousal and sex which clung to the room. When visiting the Nessus, the trick was not to inhale too deeply, that way you wouldn't smell the scent of burning flesh

and rot that so heavily scented the air outside the palace. That stink was burned into her senses, even after keeping away for all these years she could still smell it wherever she went.

“Priestess, welcome home.”

She recognized the voice instantly and slowly turned to face the demon prince. “En-Levistus, dare say that to me again and I shall rip out your tongue.” Hell had been her prison, never her home.

“You’re welcome to try.”

The sin-eater’s favorite leather chair wasn’t at its usual spot in front of the large fireplace, instead Levistus now sat in it while facing an unfamiliar portal. Moving closer she could see lines of exhaustion marring his handsome features.

“How long have you been feeding your energy into that portal?”

“Since last night. I fear our young king has gotten himself lost somewhere inside his own realm. Foolish boy tried to use a hell-gate to return to your side while his energy ran depleted. We tried to summon him, but to no avail. I’m hopeful he picks up on the energy imprint of the portal and follows it, before anyone figures out our king has gone missing.”

He gestured tiredly to the portal he’d created, exhaustion visible in every movement, and no wonder. A portal was a vortex—a bend in time and space itself, it took a great deal of magic to open one and it leeched power while remaining so. Levistus had opened a portal with gateways to all nine layers of hell, and had kept them open for hours. Such an act could only be fueled by either madness or desperation.

“Our Herald suggested we send a rescue party, but then we would be publicly conceding the fact our king is unstable in his power. You well understand the workings of Hell politics, Priestess. The more power-hungry factions within the demonarchy would seize the opportunity to have Cassius declared unfit to rule.”

So it had been desperation rather than madness. She almost felt pity for him.

“I can reach him.”

He lifted his head from his hands to wave her off. “Impossible, even with my considerable age and power I was unable to hold his essence long enough to pull him through the portal. You haven’t even reached your full powers yet.”

That statement gave her a moment's pause. She hadn't? Idiotic demon, of course she had, she had reached maturity, and so had her magic.

"I'm telling you, stubborn old goat, that I can reach the sin-eater."

"You can?" An unfamiliar source of power entered the room, celestial in origin but Amara clearly recognized the sin-eater's imprint fused within. No corruption clung to him, which made him an anomaly within the viper's nest that was the Nessus.

"Ah, you must be the newly appointed Herald, your arrival has caused quite an uproar within the realms. Good on you."

The expression on the celestial's perfectly sculpted features soured. "I'm not here by choice."

"Angel, sooner or later you'll come to understand that none of us are here by choice. Without evil there would be no good, and chaos would reign. In order to preserve the balance some get assigned the role of villain, and like it or not—you'll be made to play your part."

A smile ghosted her lips at his stunned expression. "The benefit of falling is gaining a measure of free will."

Levistus moved from his seat to stand before her. "Jez this is…"

"Amara." An odd emotion flashed through the angel's gaze when he looked at her. She merely nodded in response, unsure on how to respond, his unnerving gaze felt as if it could see through to her soul.

"Wait, he gets to use your name and I don't?" The voice of the demon prince was equal parts exhaustion and agitation.

"Yes"

"Amara, he tried to go after you. Cassius had every intention of saving you from that place."

As the angel spoke, Amara was finally able to place that strange emotion she had seen in his gaze. She bristled. He'd been pitying her.

"The path to hell is paved with good intentions. A rescue party would've been a lovely gesture, but as you can see, I've managed just fine without the sin-eater." Neither a truth nor a lie, she survived, even if she'd needed help to do so.

Avoiding her gaze, Jez moved to claim the leather bound armchair Levistus had just vacated. "I tried reaching Cassius through the mind-link, but I was blocked from him also. As his Herald, should I not have been able to contact him?"

They were both so wrapped up in their failure that they were missing the bigger picture. Dark gods help her, she simply had no patience left to deal with two pig-headed males blinded by ego.

“Have you two even considered the possibility the sin-eater might be blocking you both out on purpose?”

Two sets of eyes stared at her as if she had suddenly grown a second head. Moments ticked by in stunned silence before the angel let loose an angry string of very un-angelic words. Their variety impressing her, while earning him a disapproving glare from Levistus.

“Something must’ve happened...” Jez dropped his head into his hands, scrubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms.

He’d been here such a short time, but she determined he was already beginning to understand the demon’s character better than most. Perhaps the sin-eater had won himself a reluctant ally?

She hesitated for a moment, not accustomed to offering up information or asking for help, but the vampire had left her with little choice in either.

“Something did happen. Jareth wanted to know some information hidden inside the demon’s mind, he went digging through his memories… and I fear he might’ve unlocked some of them.”

“He did *what*?” The portal flared with a violent charge, the library filing with the oppressive wrath emanating from Levistus. “How could you *allow* that to happen?”

“I did not *allow* it to happen. While the vampire was picking through the sin-eater’s brain, mine was bleeding out through my ears... and eyes. And nose. You get the not so pretty picture.”

The tempestuous rage which had risen so quickly died off just as swiftly.

“How was he able to break through your barriers? You possess some of the most powerful protections I’ve encountered.”

Amara had given this a great deal of thought as well and could only come up with one answer. “Perhaps I wasn’t the only one with a backup plan. Looking back at the signs, I suspect the wine served was enhanced to significantly lower inhibitions.”

The fine hairs on her body rose at the menacing growl rising up from the demon prince. “You were drunk and distracted while inside the home of the eldest vampire master, how could you be so careless? I warned you this was an idiotic idea.”

“You dare judge me?” Amara’s magic rose in response to her emotions, anger and shame causing tendrils of dark magic to whip around her violently. “I didn’t see you lift a fucking finger to prevent Asmodeus from summoning him!”

“Anyone care to fill me in on what’s happening here? What’s the big deal if a vampire got into Cass’s memories?” The sound of Jez’s confusion and worry anchored her, and with great effort, Amara managed to reign in her power, gaining control over the magic which was quickly turning volatile.

“Angel, what happens when someone’s soul is destroyed?”

Eyes the color of the sea after a storm locked on hers, confusion visible within their guileless depths. “That being ceases to exist, no afterlife, no reincarnation. The destruction of a soul is considered a crime against creation for that very reason, it’s forbidden by the Heavens.”

“Hell plays by different rules, son.” There was no emotion in Levistus voice when he answered.

The library went deadly quiet as both he and Amara waited for the celestial to connect the pieces. They knew the moment he did, because the confusion in those stormy eyes was replaced with horror.

“Not possible, I sense his emotions, his thoughts. I can feel his pain, his lust and sorrow. He’s not dead.”

“The sin-eater is alive because he believes he is, because he’s fed and worshiped as if he were alive. But Cassius, *my* Cassius died nearly four hundred years ago by his father’s hand. I was there angel. And to this day his screams haunt my nights, along with the silence which followed.”

Horror turned to stubbornness, his hands shaking and the massive wings behind his back folding and expanding as if he were eager to take flight.

“No. I refuse to believe this. I can sense the life inside of him.”

“An imprint. Asmodeus selected qualities of himself he enjoyed most and placed their essence inside the empty shell which remained. He tried to mold Cassius into the perfect son and heir. It took Azadiel nearly three hundred years to reach through to the sin-eater, to repair enough of his broken mind to help him break free from his father’s influence.”

Her hands shook. Hearing Levistus recount the events, while he’d been the one to set in motion the events of that fateful night was almost too much. The dull ache of loss consumed her, left her numb to the point of

not realizing darkness and magic were gathering within her palms. Maybe not today, not tomorrow, but one day he would pay...

“Amara, easy on…”

Blinking rapidly, she became aware of the steadily growing concentration of magic, surprised at the power she sensed within the energy, enough to kill. They were both staring at her, Levistus with determination and a hint of fear, the angel with surprise and suspicion.

“Amara, who were you to Cassius?” Jez whispered, his brows drawn tight.

Her answer came in a broken sound, a whisper barely loud enough to be heard, “I was no one...”

It was Levistus who answered, “not true, she was his life, and he was hers...”

“I swear to the gods I’ll find a way to break my vow and murder you where you stand if you do not shut up this instant, old man!”

Jez sunk back into the chair, defeat and sorrow bleeding from the angel as if spilling from a freshly opened wound. “If he remembers his soul being destroyed, he’ll become self aware… he’ll know he died.”

“With the illusion shattered and no soul to anchor him, his mind will break and his body will follow.”

She’d searched every corner of the realms for anything that could protect the sin-eater while returning his memories. And instead had discovered there was a reason destroying a soul was considered a taboo, there was no undoing it. What was lost—was lost forever.

“And now the vampire may have unearthed some lingering memories while rummaging through Cassius’s damaged mind. He might start to remember.”

Her heart sank to her toes. “Not might… he already has. He said things to me while the Blood Lord was searching his memories, things the sin-eater could never have known, but Cassius would.”

“What did he say, Priestess?”

Levistus came to loom over her when she refused to answer, his body tense with anger.

“What did he say to you?”

“*Assat shi, you were made for me…*”

Precious words he had spoken to her moments before they had exchanged their binding vows, when doubt had plagued her. Cassius

could've had anyone he wanted for a bride, and yet had chosen a warlock prisoner. She'd been thrown away to be forgotten, yet he'd offered her life instead.

"Leave her be, Levistus, if she says he's remembering then that's all there is to it."

Having come to a decision the angel stood, and within a few large steps placed himself between Amara and Levistus, giving the demon prince his back as he turned to her.

"It'll be all right, we don't even know for certain what was done to his mind, yeah? I understand what you're asking and I vow that I'll do all within my power to protect your Cassius."

She felt a smile tug at the corners of her lips, silly, for she felt her grief all the way into her soul. "He's not mine anymore, angel."

The sound of humorless laughter rose up from behind Jez's back.

"Sorry to interrupt this special moment you two are clearly sharing, but in case you've forgotten, we can't protect the king if we don't even know *where in the hells he is*."

Stepping away from the herald, Amara moved for the portal, her head throbbed with tension, the rest of her numb and cold. After four hundred years she had made no progress in dealing with the loss, it was the one wound that refused to heal. And it was during moments like these that she wished she could afford the luxury of death, an end to it.

The flat of her palm merged with the energy of the portal, not bothering to waste her own magic since Levistus was already using his own to keep it opened. With as much pride as she could muster, Amara lifted her chin in challenge at the demon prince, cast what she hoped was a reassuring smile at the angel. Closing her eyes, she focused on the memory of his comforting scent, the warm sound of his honey and whiskey voice, the softness of his hair as she ran her fingers through it, her lips parting as she whispered into the opened portal.

"Cassius, son of Asmodeus, Prince of Lust, King of Hell, Sin-Eater, I summon you."

46

MY KINGDOM FOR A MAP

SOME PARTS OF THE HELLS HE RECOGNIZED. SOME PARTS, HE WASN'T welcome in. As a technicality, all the Archdeacons were answerable to him, but in their own realms, they ruled, and he did not interfere.

He stepped over the portal fold again, from the Stygian ice through to the liquid fire of the Phlegethon. Farther and farther from the Nessus and home, hellfire trailing in his wake.

When he came through to the vast barrenness of the Dis, he dropped himself onto a jagged boulder, and watched the lightning flash through the murky not-quite-light sky.

He needed to focus and figure out how the hells he was activating these portals. His thoughts didn't seem to be directing them, and his emotions seemed a blank void, so he was discounting that theory as well.

The hellfire sputtered and ate at itself, swallowing up the portal.

Cass stared at the spot where the portal had been for far too long, trying to will it back into existence. He was fucking stuck in the second realm. He could see the iron spires of Dispater's fortress, miles and miles off in the distance, and this terrain was terribly inhospitable. It would take him days to reach it.

Even when he did make it to the fortress, there were no known portals to the Nessus from here, he'd have to go to the Avernus and try to sweet-talk Barbatos… he could thank him for the pretty Erinyes. Then it would be a social visit and not misconstrued as a threat.

He got to his feet, determined, brushed the dust off his pants, and started walking, when he felt her beckoning. Tugging at his mind until he could focus on nothing else.

Amara.

His heart pounded, sweat making his body clammy. She was in danger. He was trapped. He looked around frantically for an exit —some way out — to her...

There. The hellfire sparked into existence in the same spot he'd watched it dissipate. He felt her—all he had to do was follow the trail of her essence…

He landed, back in his own bedroom, facing down a furious Priestess and worn-out Levistus. He scrambled to right himself as he absorbed the sight of her, memories flitting through his mind, superimposing over the reality in front of him.

He'd thought his emotions had gone blank?

He burned.

He stepped toward her, watching her breath catch and lips soften, ignoring the growl from Levistus, until he was toe to toe with her. He held his hand up to her face, running his fingers down the side and under her chin. The bruising was slight, her bones healed.

Pain was still bright in her eyes.

He threaded his fingers through hers, pressing their palms together in silent promise. His. *She was his*. He leaned in close, inhaling the scent of her, so familiar, the confusion in his mind stilling for one precious moment.

With a soft growl, he moved his palm to the back of her head and brought his lips down to hers, kissing her softly, waiting for her to give back.

His entire body was burning for her.

She softened against him and ran her hands into his hair, pulling him down harder and he groaned, deepening their kiss, one hand fisting her hair, the other running down her back to grip her hip.

She was kissing him back with a ferocity that matched his own, her teeth tugging his lip, her tongue tangling with his. He moved his hand lower gripping her leg, pulling it up to hook around his waist, he could feel the heat of her through his pants his erection straining with the need to be buried in it.

He hadn’t had sex in days. A first, surely. Mara had him so worked up, yet so fucking confused—he’d forgotten the basic need for it.

“Enough!” Levistus shouted, the room shaking with the power behind his voice.

Cass dropped her leg, breathing hard, pressing kisses to her jaw. The vampire had punched her there. And her cheekbone—it had been shattered. He kissed her eyebrow, then her other, in silent apology—he hadn’t been enough—

“Stop this madness Cassius,” Levistus said, grabbing his shoulder. “Have you asked her how she got free?”

Reason came back to him slowly, and he met her gaze with a question in his.

“You’re healed,” Cass stated, the question in his tone.

She stiffened, and moved to pull back, but his hand cupped the back of her neck, she couldn’t move too far.

“Gwynn,” she said, dropping her hands back to her sides.

Cass stiffened and stepped back. Of course it was the Huntsman.

“The Dark King is betrothed to Verity’s infant daughter, and you’re still involved with him?” She deserved better.

Mara blanched, her hands clamping down on his arms. “What?” She whispered, her voice raw.

Had she not known?

He pushed her hair back from her face, watching emotions flicker through her eyes. He couldn’t tell what emotion, but it was too strong for her to hide.

“I was coming back for you,” he whispered, taking another step back and turning to look around his room.

Jez was lounging on the bed, facing them and observing, but making no move to get up. Levistus was edging himself between him and Amara—and she was closed off once more.

“I came to bring you this,” she said, pulling a ring out. *The* ring. How had she gotten away with that?

“I’m remembering things, Mara,” he said, peeking up from under his eyelashes. He moved to step closer, but Levistus stepped fully in between them, putting a hand up to Cass’s chest.

He moved around Levistus to look at her, reaching for her as she stepped back.

“I remember a girl.” His brows drew together, the puzzle of the pieces of his memory still not adding up into a clear picture.

Her eyes. *Her* familiar scent...

Her mouth set in a mutinous line and she moved around Levistus enough to press the ring into his palm, closing his fingers around it, her hand lingering over his closed fist for a brief moment.

It was pain in her eyes. Her expression was completely closed off to him, so he couldn’t see it, but he felt it. Her sigil burned like flame on his chest. And he didn’t like it.

“Don’t,” she said, her expression hard. “Don’t do this Sin, don’t go down this path, and don’t ask me to follow you there”

“The two of you need to stay apart,” Levistus said, voice cold as he stared Cass down.

“I’m leaving. I have duties to attend to.” Amara stepped back before Cass could snag her hand back. “The Temple will be opened to celebrate Ostara. I’ll expect your attendance.” She nodded to Cass, presented Levistus with a one finger salute, then turned and slipped out through a portal of her own.

Raw anguish moved from his guts out, his body no longer burning, but frozen. Cold and numb.

“Put that ring on and calm yourself, boy,” Levistus said, grabbing Cass by the shoulders.

With trembling hands, he eased on the ring, turning his hand to admire the sheer gaudiness of it. If it worked, he’d finally be free and left alone, no longer summon-able by his father.

All he ever wanted from his existence. Wasn’t it?

47

ENTIRE LIST OF GRIEVANCES

The shackles dug into his wrists. His legs had tired out long ago, his body weak. He hadn't fed since… he couldn't remember. Basileus came by every day to bathe him and to encourage him to apologize to his father. So far, Cass would rather die.

He'd failed her. He couldn't even fight for himself.

Today, his father came in. He'd grown tall, but his father still towered over him. His wings were spread out and flaming behind him, and Cass could no longer support his own weight, had no choice but to hang here…

"How long have you been going to visit the warlock?" His father's eyes blazed as he stepped close. His fingers grasped Cass's chin and lifted his face. "How long?"

Cass growled but he was too weak to put any real heat behind it.

"Mine." His voice was raspy from disuse.

Asmodeus chuckled, the flames on his wings dousing. "You sink to this and for a woman? Son, I'll enjoy the day when you truly have something to fight for."

But he did have something to fight for. Her.

His wife that he hadn't had a chance to do more than kiss to seal their vows.

The shackles were undone, and he fell to a useless heap to the floor, his father walking out of the room without a backward glance, leaving him in Basileus's hands.

He choked on an indrawn breath as he was shaken awake, disrupting the nightmare… no, he was kidding himself to think that was anything less than a memory of his past. So why couldn't he place it?

Jez was looking down at him with concern and Cass realized the lumps digging into his back were the angel's legs.

"Bad dream?" Jez said, brows furrowed with contemplation.

Cass nodded. "Why would someone remember being married when they clearly never have been?" The question was more rhetorical, he wasn't expecting Jez would be able to answer.

"What exactly are you remembering?" Levistus spoke from somewhere in the room, startling Cass.

"Everyone just hanging around watching me sleep now?" Cass said, swiping his hand down his face and sitting up.

"Waiting for you to wake up," Levistus said with a shrug. "You passed out shortly after Amara left, before you could tell us where you'd been."

"After you made her leave you mean." Cass scowled at the other demon.

"You need to be worrying less about the priestess and more about your father's next move," Levistus said as he walked over to prop himself against the mantle, blocking the low flames from Cass's sight.

"We thought your father may have summoned you again," Jez added, his arm reaching behind Cass's shoulders to rest along the back of the sofa.

"Fuck." Cass clenched his hands and looked back to Levistus. "The ring might be too little, too late."

Levistus stilled, looking Cass over. "That's where you went then? He summoned you?"

"I think…" Cass's brows pulled together. "I made my own way to him."

"Did he hurt you?" Jez leaned up and over Cass, moving his hair out of his eyes.

"No." Cass groaned and leaned back. "He played me like a fucking pawn. I signed an agreement. Levistus…"

He'd fucked up. Given his sister free rein of his realm. How had that become the least important matter on the table?

"I almost forgot about Glasya," Cass said, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling.

“What did you do, son?” Levistus asked, voice cold.

He looked up slowly, flinching just the slightest at the judgement burning in Levistus’ eyes.

“I had to agree to a compact between my sister and I.” He swallowed hard, shaking his head. “It gives her free access to the Nessus, and me to the Malbolge.”

Levistus’s wrath hit him like a whip. Jez threw his arm over Cass’s shoulders, glaring up at the other demon, who hadn’t moved. He was completely frozen in place, his black eyes gleaming with calculation.

“It was that or bind my power to hers. Which wasn’t even an option.”

“If it wasn’t an option,” Levistus said, fury leaking into his tone. “Then you can be sure Asmodeus planned to push you to the lesser. He wanted this compact—why?”

Cass took a deep breath and admitted the worst of it, “if I try to banish her again, it gives him a loophole to come back.” He braced himself.

“You know what this means, don’t you Cassius?” Levistus sighed and turned back to Cass, exasperation on every line of his face. “She’s going to be pushing you to your wit’s end. She wants her father freed.”

“I’m going to call my own herald here to stay, he’s needed closer to home now, I’m thinking,” Levistus said with a firm nod. “There’s nothing in the contract that gives her free rein?”

“No.” Cass scoffed. “Access. Only access.”

“You better warn your generals,” Jez said, surprising Cass. “Better to prepare.”

Levistus nodded. “Time to get your own game on the table. You need to know who your players are.”

“If I even have anyone on my side.” Cass shook his head sadly, then looked up as understanding dawned. “You want me to go meet with the Archdeacons.” Cassius was King of all the Hells, in title. The Archdeacons held fealty to him, but ruled their own rifts within the Hells. He’d taken for granted that they’d be loyal to his crown.

Levistus gave a brusque nod. “It’s time. I’ll send out the missives. We’ll meet with Mephistopheles first, since he guards the main portal to the Nessus. She won’t be able to bring an army through if he’s on your side. Then Barbatos, since he has the most portals in his realm.”

Levistus took a step toward the door then turned back. “And don’t go to the temple for Ostara’s celebration.” His eyes went bleak. “Just… not a

good idea.” He turned and walked out before Cass could question him about that statement.

Of course it was a good idea. He glutted at that celebration every year. An orgy dedicated to fertility? The level of depravity there taught even him a few things.

“You’re upset about her? The warlock?” Jez asked as he pulled Cass closer.

Fuck. All he wanted to do was not think of it. The fact that he was living in a surreal state of memories that didn’t seem real and reality that didn’t seem possible. Locking the memories back away wasn’t working, the fuckers were persistent. For each one that he pushed out of his mind, ten more screamed out from the darkness.

“Cass.” Jez was shaking his shoulder. “Are you even all there?”

“Someone messed up my head.” Cass shook it, trying to set things to rights.

“You keep dissociating, it creeps me the fuck out.” Jez’s hot palm landed on his thigh. “Stop digging through the rubble.”

Cass scrunched his nose and glared at the angel. “What?”

Jez just shook his head, eyes full of sadness. “You have issues, demon. Get some rest for tonight before anything else comes up.”

48

BLESSED ARE THE LUSTY

WORSHIPPERS DESCENDED UPON ASURIM FROM ALL CORNERS OF THE realms for the festival of Ostara, an annual celebration held in honor of the goddess of fertility, whose blessings were highly sought after.

The ritual honoring the fertility goddess coincided with the spring equinox upon mortal realm, when Ostara was at her most powerful. Mortals in their own funny little ways had never completely forgotten about Ostara, nor the awakening of life she represented. This made the goddess a deity of power, and this festival was their best chance at gaining her favor.

With the exception of the boy Maleficus, no children had been born of warlock parentage over the last three hundred years. Ever since the primordial energy which breathed life into Asurim had become dangerously close to being depleted, wombs had remained barren, and seed failed to plant life.

No matter how much divine energy Amara harvested, no matter the amount of favor she bargained amongst the gods, she never managed to rekindle its power. Their magic was waning and the realm wasn't healing, she was barely able to sustain its demands. So they sought out Ostara, invoking the goddess into their temples, beseeching her to bless the lands and people of Asurim.

Through the celebration, the halls of the nine temples were filled with revelry, feasts and depravity. Pleasures of the flesh playing a central role through trysts and orgies, those who partook in the celebration grew lost to

their instinctual need to mate, to ignite that spark of life. That surrender of control to passion they referred to as Ostara's touch. In the past, most of the participants who experienced it had soon after found themselves blessed carrying life. Except for the warlocks.

This time would be different. The boy Maleficus stood proof that it was possible still for a warlock to conceive. As such, Amara had spared no effort or expense in the preparations for the festival this year, hoping this time the goddess would bestow her favor upon those who sought it most.

The pinnacle of the celebration was currently taking place in the Ninth temple, where only those invited by Amara herself were granted entry.

The stone floors of the hall lay littered with warm furs and writhing bodies. The evening air which flowed through opened terraces carried upon it the scent of opium and musk, and the throaty moans of those already lost to Ostara's touch.

"Praise be Ostara, place your blessings upon those who honor you this night."

The ceremonial mask covering her face felt stifling, the lilac silks and golden chains covering her bound too tight against her body. Mercifully, her feet remained bare, she insisted on that. Each of the nine temples of Asurim were constructed from different crystal stones, yet all were designed to conduct and amplify energy during rituals. Amara wouldn't be participating, but with her feet bared she could at least feel Ostara's divine power flow through the onyx stone beneath her feet. Calling to her like a siren's song.

Acolytes moved gracefully amongst the revelers with crystal decanters of rich wine, diligent in not letting a single goblet go empty. Others carried silver trays with offerings of ripened fruits harvested with care from Asurim soil.

Firelight flickered in the breeze from the torches and lanterns lining the walls, casting a dance of light and shadows through the main hall. And around her, deep cries and breathless sighs rose up into the ether like primal prayers, the ancient rhythm of thrusting flesh a constant background symphony.

Plumes of incense and opium billowed up from golden thuribles which hung suspended with colorful ribbons from the banisters, upon which spectators would linger, observing the celebration below until tempted to partake.

The altar stood ready as it was every year, draped in silks and furs, awaiting her offering. As high priestess it was she who was expected to take place upon it, surrendering herself to Ostara's touch and thereby invoking the goddess. It was the one offering she couldn't make. The touch of unfamiliar hands upon her body made her ill, the memory of her forced submission to their entry, their cruelty, the pain, the blood...

Another life, a different girl…

It had taken Gwynn years to coax her to trust. In the beginning he had simply wrapped his arms around her, shielding them both as her magic lashed out around them, volatile with the torment she felt at simply being held. Eventually her magic had calmed, and slowly her body had learned to accept the Huntsman's touch.

And then there was the sin-eater, whose touch she craved instinctively from the very moment he'd set foot back inside her cell in the Malsheem. It was twisted and wrong. Her mind acutely aware of who her Cassius had been and what the sin-eater was, yet her body stubbornly refused to acknowledge the two as separate beings.

Her gaze moved over the altar, lost to her own thoughts until she felt the weight of eyes on her, drawing her gaze to a set of eyes dark as coal staring back at her. The sin-eater.

Not everyone who joined the festivities did so in the hopes of being blessed by the goddess. The demon attended simply to gorge himself on the lust and depravity which flooded the temple during the ceremony. He enjoyed his freedom too much, and his rule too little to accept the responsibilities of parenthood.

She found him sprawled upon the steps of her altar, an unspoken challenge reflecting in his dark expression. When his hand moved, her gaze followed, his fingers languidly trailing down the inner thigh of the beautiful female riding him. When his fingers dipped between her legs to cup her sex, she was suddenly grateful for the concealment of her mask, uncertain her expression wouldn't reveal her own idiotic jealousy. Bad enough he would be able to sense it if he were paying attention.

She sucked in a breath when another female joined him, kneeling beside his head, their gazes interrupted when the Fae female bent down to press her breast against his lips in offering. Her final glimpse of the demon revealed his sinful grin right before his mouth closed around a rosy peak.

"Blessed be Ostara, for you are worshipped well."

Hopefully the goddess would be pleased enough with the reverence already bestowed to overlook her absence, for her feet had already turned of their own accord, moving her towards the safety and solitude of her private chambers. Her escape thwarted when unfamiliar fingers closed around her upper arm, a chill of foreboding shivering down her spine, freezing her in place.

“Sarratum, you’re going the wrong direction, it’s this way your altar awaits.”

It took a few moments before memory cooperated enough to place a name to that overbearing voice; Grimorum, chieftain to the Gargoyle isles. He and her Dominae clashed frequently when it came to equal rights for the warlocks and gargoyles who called Asurim home.

Built like a descendant of the Goliath, he towered over her. Light grey hair bound in braids, his features angular, body built as if carved out of stone.

“It would do you well to release your hold on me En-Grimorum, the only reason you yet live is due to my refusal to cause a scene and risk disturbing the ceremony.” She had killed for less offense than a touch.

As the chieftain’s hand released its grip on her, Amara’s senses grew alert to that familiar power imprint which had first made her stop in her tracks, its essence fusing with the energy within the ninth temple. One that was unwelcome here, and promised misfortune upon this blessed event.

Her eyes scanned through the hall, no longer finding the sin-eater upon the steps of the altar. Instead her gaze found Namtar roaming her halls, his rotting form wrapped in bandages, his brown burial robe floating around him as he moved amongst the bodies of the worshippers and revelry, invisible to all but to those who could gaze into the ether. His presence a mockery to this celebration, bringing the pall of death to a festival meant to produce life.

His attendance would surely give offense to Ostara. Why would the Sumerian death god risk the wrath of a more powerful deity than himself by coming here?

Too distracted by Namtar’s sudden appearance and the risk he posed upon the success of the event, she failed to register the chieftain’s swift movement until too late.

“Unhand me this instant!”

The words came out in a snarl as his hand roughly cupped her breast, his grip bruising her flesh beneath, tearing silk.

“I’ve come to the temple to claim you, Warlock Queen.” Grimorum’s possessive gaze traveled her body with far too much familiarity. “If I recall it was by your decree that Warlocks and Gargoyles live under the Asurian banner as equals.”

His thumb flicked across her exposed flesh, causing a shudder of revulsion to slither through her. Still debating whether killing him was worth risking Ostara’s ire.

“What would could make us more equal than you giving birth to my son? I shall fill your fruitless belly with my seed and place my bloodline upon the Asurian throne, only then will gargoyles and warlocks be true equals.”

Pain turned to blinding rage, the tempest of dark magic she tried to rein in slipping from her control. Summoned by her distress, darkness sprang from her like vines, grabbing hold of the hulking creature, forcing him to release his grip as thick tendrils of energy crushed stone and cut off his circulation.

Can’t kill during Ostara...

His massive figure flew across the hall with her burst of power. Her heart thundered in her ears, her gaze finding Namtar’s eerie stare fixed on her from beneath his mask before her attention returned to Grimorum’s crumpled body amid a pile of broken tables.

“Just stay down you big dumb fuck…” she mumbled.

She couldn’t risk the ceremony, already most of the worshippers had been released from the thrall of Ostara’s touch and were fleeing to the safety of the banisters, clearing the floor of the hall. This left only her and the death god standing tall as the gargoyle chieftain rose back onto his feet, rivulets of black blood trailing down the too-harsh lines of his cheekbones.

Blood spilled during a celebration of life, *may Ostara forgive me…*

The next moment, he lunged for her.

“Ah, shit...”

Her magic swirled, ready to attack, eager to kill.

-CRUNCH-

He never reached her.

Before her magic had time to latch, Grimorum's massive body collapsed, the sound of horrified shrieks and jubilant cheers rising up from the crows upon the bannisters as Grimorum's head slipped free from his neck to thud upon the black stone floor. From behind the slain chieftain's body, Cassius's bloodied form appeared.

The sin-eater's gaze was wild as he stared down at his blood coated hands.

"Sin…?"

As soon as her words reached him, he moved for her, his stained fingers reaching out for the torn fabric of her robe, covering her exposed breast.

"A life sacrificed in honor of Ostara, may the Goddess find his death worthier than his life." His tone was calm and commanding, leaving no one to guess the anguish hidden within that whiskey and honey voice.

Amara well knew what nightmares lay hidden within the ruins of his mind, and what memories could be triggered by this.

"Demon look at me, I'm okay…. you didn't let him harm me."

As she reached for him, a rush of divine energy flooded the room, its power coursing through the stone beneath her feet. The imprint familiar, but never before sensed this strongly. The temple was immersed in the energy of life, Ostara's touch permeating the hall, flowing through crystal and revelers alike who hurried to claim a space upon the floors.

"She heard you…Sin, she accepted your tribute."

All around them worshippers were overcome by the influx of sexual energy, its power so compelling even Amara's protections were rendered useless by it, while its intensity nearly brought the sin-eater to his knees.

"Holy hells."

Lust spread through her, flowing from his sigil upon her palm into her bloodstream, filling her with need, making her burn. From behind the sin-eater she spotted the dark silhouette of the death god, watching them intently.

"Sin, this is bad…"

Her body grew hot—too hot, the scraps of silk covering her skin scraping like sandpaper, her legs shaking as the dull ache of need built between her thighs. Panic setting in as she grew wet.

"Listen to me, you need to go, it isn't safe here..."

His lips moved against her ear, his lean body towering over hers. “I’ll keep you safe, I’ll tear the head off anyone who thinks to touch you again.”

His hot breath trailed down her neck, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. “Don’t reject me Mara, I can scent your need, feel your lust. It perfectly matches my own.”

His hand gently cupped her breast, his warm touch easing the discomfort of bruised flesh. Sensation assailed her, her back arching ever so slightly to press deeper into his touch. Her own knees buckling when his mouth claimed her breast, his tongue lapping at the stiffened peak between his lips.

“Dark gods, mercy...”

She had her limits, and they’d been reached. Her body trembled with fear, confusion and worry, but neither the emotions nor the presence of the death god managed to override the claim of Ostara’s touch and the pleasure of feeling the sin-eater’s body pressed against her own.

Her surrender came as he knelt before her, his fingers unclasping the golden chains, pushing aside her silk coverings as he pressed his cheek between her thighs, coaxing her to part for him.

“Can I have you Mara?”

He was whispering against her skin, placing open mouthed kisses along every inch of bare flesh, up her inner thigh, his hot breath causing small quakes in her core.

“You don't understand the consequences of what you ask.” Her voice was no more substantial than a sigh, and she wasn’t sure he heard. “I’ll be your destruction.”

She bit her bottom lip to stop herself from crying out his name when his fingers dug into her inner thighs. Her fingers moved to tangle through the thick length of his dark hair.

“Then destroy me priestess. I’m ravenous, and you are a feast.”

A wicked smile curled his full lips as he guided her foot and braced it up on his thigh, opening her to him. The heat of his breath flowed over the wet silk clinging to her sex, before his fingers brushed aside the fabric and his mouth closed over her center.

“Cass…”

“Am I going to like what you’ll do to me?”

“I’ll make sure you enjoy everything I do to you Assat-sa, I’ll teach you.”

An influx of malicious energy intruded upon her euphoria, disrupting the bliss of the demon's mouth upon her. Again, she could sense eyes on her, the energy imprint not enthralling like the sin-eater's, only deeply unsettling. Namtar. He was watching them. And by allowing this she was placing the sin-eater in peril, for even though he was not her husband, the demon remained her weakness.

Namtar…

"Cass... please." Her hands dug into his hair, tugging at him. Dark gods, his tongue was *so hot*.

He must've mistaken her urgency, for rather than releasing her, the demon let out a harsh groan, then speared his tongue inside of her. The world burned away around them, leaving nothing behind save her and the demon within her arms. A heaven made for two.

"You're exposing your weakness, Amara," a dark and sensual voice whispered from behind her, tone quiet enough that only she would hear. "The death god won't hesitate to take him from you, he'll use him to force the surrender of your soul."

"Gwynn..." Why was he here? The Fae King always refused to attend these celebrations before, she'd always asked.

Her eyes never left Cassius, holding his gaze as he stared up at her, first in confusion, expression turning hostile as he noticed Gwynn behind her.

"She is *mine*, Huntsman," Cass growled, baring his teeth, "Mara has always been mine."

Long fingers clutched her nape, forcing her to step back from Cass's hold.

"You have no idea the forces you play against. It's my bed she occupies, and there she'll stay. She's not for you, demon… let go."

The fingers on her thighs gripped tighter. "I can protect her."

Again that singular, painful squeeze gripped her chest. Her fingers moved to unclench his hair, brushing through its soft length instead. Her Cassius had spoken those same words, and had been made to pay the ultimate price for choosing her. *Not again.*

Ignoring the Fae King's reach for her, she lowered her lips to the sin-eater's, claiming his mouth, tasting her own lust upon his tongue. But the kiss she gave him was not an exchange of lust, need or pleasure. But a confession of the soul.

Since his had been taken from him, the demon wouldn't be able to translate the unspoken words she placed within the kiss. Still, that didn't stop her from weaving every hope, every sorrow, and every truth into her reverence of his lips. It carried the weight of dreams she'd failed to protect, of promises broken, and a true love lost.

For the first time since her wedding vows, her kiss was true.

"I'm not sure I can bear the idea of you hating me demon, but I *know* I couldn't survive losing you again." Her fingers moved to cup his cheek as her lips slowly parted from his, her spirit breaking at the sight of the hurt and betrayal within those coal-dark eyes.

"Again...? Mara, what are you telling me? I don't understand…"

"And you should pray you'll never come to understand." Gwynn pulled her to her feet before shoving her behind his back. "Stay away, for both your sakes, and that of the Realms."

Amara's gaze broke free from the sin-eater's to follow the direction Gwynn was staring at, and found the death god standing upon the steps of her altar, luminous eyes peering out from beneath that ominous mask, their gaze fixed upon Cassius.

"I'm not leaving, and I'm not surrendering her to you." Cass's jaw set at an obstinate angle as he brushed his tongue gently across his lip, greedily claiming her taste as he glared at the Dark King.

"Did you tell her, Fae? That she has no future with you? That you belong to another?"

Pressed against his back, she could feel Gwynn's chest rumble with a repressed growl, but no sound came out.

"She has been promised to another as well, and if you do not heed her words, Death will be breathing down your neck, young king."

Cass pulled her forward, forcing her out from behind the Huntsman's back. His fingers digging into her shoulders. "Listen to me Mara, whatever claim the god has on you, we'll find a way to break it. I'm not afraid of death."

Her fingers closed around his wrists, lifting his hands from her. "You may not be afraid, demon. But I am. If he takes you, he takes all I have left of *him.*"

Cass reached out for her. "Mara?"

"I've come to claim the blessing of Ostara." Gwynn's voice boomed through the large hall, drawing the attention of everyone in attendance

before the rutting crowd exploded into cheers and praise at the announcement, knowing the climax of the celebration was at hand.

Amara’s own shocked gaze moved from the Fae King to the altar laying in wait.

“Gwynn, don’t do this.”

“Namtar is watching Amara, set him on my path, he can’t harm me. You vowed to protect the demon, stay true to your word and join me now.”

“Mara, please don't... don’t accept,” Cass said brokenly.

In that moment, she wanted nothing more desperately than to take the sin-eater in her arms and kiss him until the devastation left his eyes. But doing so would not be mercy, only by leaving could she spare him.

So instead of giving in, she straightened her back, emptied her mind and forced herself to ignore the panic rising within her as she placed her hand into Gwynn’s extended one, the crowd growing frenzied.

Tonight, the goddess would surely offer her blessing, for the altar would finally have its sacrifice as the high priestess surrendered herself.

With an irritated growl, Gwynn’s large hands closed around her waist before effortlessly flinging her over his shoulder and making way straight for the altar in the center of the temple.

Moving up the steps she heard Namtar’s hiss. “Is this your choice then?”

“Yes.”

And how she lamented it, because the demon would never forgive her for this betrayal. He’d genuinely offered her his protection, and she rejected him. The sin-eater was many things, but forgiving he was not. He would grow to hate her for the choice she made.

Good. Hate meant the demon would give no power to the death god. He’d remain safe, and Amara would simply go back to watching over him from the shadows, until death came for her and the contract collected its due.

As Gwynn climbed the steps leading up to the altar, the cheers and roars of the crowd followed them, chants filling the hall as he put her down upon the podium facing the hall.

“Have you lost your damn mind woman?” Gwynn spoke low, leaning over her.

For as much as she respected and cared for the Dark Fae King, there was no love between them. He was cursed to love only one, and she had

bound her heart to love only one.

“I think I may have.” The hurt she felt was raw, the pain both ancient and new. Time failed to heal her wounds, instead it only added more.

She turned her head, needing to find Cassius, only to feel strong fingers close around her throat and clench tight. Behind her mask tears stung her eyes, to her shame she knew they weren't from his punishing grip. A dead heart was still capable of breaking, she was proof of that. She tried to speak, but couldn't, was struggling to hold back her a flow of tears as she was set upon the altar.

“Think A’ stór. Clear your mind of the lust you feel for him.” Gwynn’s hypnotic gaze finally penetrated through to what rational thoughts remained.

“There now, no tears. Your love and sacrifice keeps him safe.” His free hand trailed down to her waist, dragging her to the edge of the altar, his hips settled firmly between her legs. “Shall we end your celebration on a high note?”

“A baby, Gwynn?”

She forced herself to focus on that outrage rather than the pain, her claws extending and magic surfacing, ready to attack the Dark Fae with all she had upon release.

“You made a compact to betrothe yourself to an infant. Did you even spare me a moment of thought before deciding there was no future for us?”

“I’ll do what needs to be done to see me free of my curse.” He watched his hands running up her legs.

“Release me,” she snarled.

He didn't release her. Instead, he moved his fingers up her legs to possessively cup her sex, his finger moving between her folds with a slow, maddening stroke, making her moan.

White hot lightning shot through her system at his sudden touch, her body still on edge from Cassius’s caresses. To her shame, her breath hitched, and her heart pounded against her ribcage.

He sensed her response to him, his grip around her throat loosening ever so slightly at her body’s response to his familiar touch.

A dark smile formed on his lips, his cheek pressed to hers as he whispered softly in her ear, “I can help you to forget him. You know this well. Surrender.”

He moved to slide two fingers inside her as he spoke, spreading her for him.

“Gwynn!”

“Surrender and accept that he’ll never be yours.”

Those words shattered what was left of the hold she had on her emotions. She lifted her leg and planted her foot into his chest, kicking him back before jumping off the altar, coming to stand directly before him, the tip of a tiny claw prodding into his chest.

“There are many things I have to accept, Gwynn,” she gritted out, “but I do not have to accept you in my bed knowing you took away the right of a mere infant to choose her own destiny in this life.”

She shoved him back, feeling a smug satisfaction at the sight of him falling back against the very altar he’d expected her to sacrifice her dignity on.

Ostara, Namtar and guests from all over the realms watched, and she let them. For as she ripped off her mask, they would only see her fury.

“As for me? I won’t be made second. Not by you, not by anyone.”

Her body was strung taut and aching with unmet needs, causing her legs to tremble the entire journey back to her rooms.

49

FINE, LET'S TRY A DIFFERENT WAY

THE SURREAL TABLEAU OF CARNAL LUST IN EVERY DEPICTION POSSIBLE WAS a beautiful mockery of the worst sort. The juxtaposition of beauty and savagery, the rawness of lust unbridled was his comfort zone.

Used to be.

He took in the scene and realized that from the moment he stepped into the temple, he'd been detached him from this—the very thing he'd been created for.

Fuck and all he could smell was her. Could still taste her on his lips.

She leaned back into the Huntsman, submission and sorrow filling her eyes, and he turned away.

She'd made her choice.

He wasn't enough.

His anguished roar trembled through the very foundations of the temple, betrayal and fury blazing through him. His own fucking memory, lying to him.

If any of the things he remembered were true, she wouldn't have denied him. He didn't know what was true anymore.

He tore open a crude portal, uncaring who was touched by the hell-flame, and stalked through to his own suite of rooms.

He reeked of women, hands and face had been buried in them, his balls still ached from not finishing, but not as much as his chest did.

She'd denied him.

He stripped with angry, jerky motions and stepped into the shower, leaning forward onto his arms and just letting the water rain over him. Memories kept surfacing, floating up and rolling back into his mind before he could grasp them. Flashes of moments in time, tearing up emotions in their wake.

Her eyes glowing from the dark. Her fingertips gently brushing tears from his cheeks. The feel of her outrage on his behalf—the only one who had ever felt that for him. Mara's eyes… his ghost… Assat-shi… No.

Lies.

He wanted the priestess with an intensity he'd never felt, and couldn't comprehend. He wasn't meant to be with one female, it was against his very nature of being. Still.

With a growl, he punched the slab of tile. Why? What was so wrong with him? He was a king in his own right. He was younger than the Fae King, but he was worthy—was he not?

"You come in here like a thundercloud of misery," Jez said from inside the bathroom. Cass hadn't even heard him come in. "And now you're sulking in the shower. Did something happen, Cass?"

Jez walked around the tile wall and leaned, crossing his arms and waiting for an answer.

"I'm not sulking," Cass said, still facing the wall.

"Well you aren't in here washing," Jez snarked back.

Cass turned with a defiant glare, pouring shampoo into his hand, holding Jez's gaze the entire time he slathered it into his hair.

"Enjoying the view?" Cass said, arching a brow, smirking until the shampoo ran into his eye.

"Fucking hells that burns." He sputtered and spit as Jez chuckled and moved back to let Cass shower.

He washed himself thoroughly, until no trace of her scent remained. Except in his memory. Damn it all. His mouth watered with the memory of how close he'd been…

He grabbed a towel and ran it down his face and nearly bumped into Jez.

"You couldn't wait in the bedroom?" Cass glowered at him as he wrapped a towel around his waist.

"I'm waiting to hear why you came back like a big aching cloud of gloom." Jez looked him up and down slowly.

Cass took a moment to collect himself, banking the power that threatened to erupt at the angel's blatant perusal. He thought Jez wasn't like that. That he had one person, at least, that didn't want him like that.

He stepped forward with a slow measured step, walking forward until he was nearly pressing up against the angel, with Jez's back to the wall.

"I don't want to talk about it." Cass placed a hand on the wall beside Jez's head. "What do you want from me?" He rested his forehead on that hand.

"I want you to stop gutting me with this pain you feel." Jez bared his teeth, straightening and trying to pull back, his throat visibly moving as he swallowed. "I have my own."

Cass trailed his free hand down the angel's chest, settling it at the waistband of his pants. The angel's lust hit him with a blinding burst.

"You're certain that's what you want, Jez'Piel?" Cass ran his hand down Jez's rampant erection, his fingers gently cupping his balls and pulling them up as he brought his hand back up the length.

"Stop. Cass." Jez grabbed his hand. "Get a hold of your power."

Cass turned his face, so his lips touched Jez's neck, his body aching with the pain of betrayal and need—

"I can make you feel good, I need to." Cass fumbled his hand free and worked open the button of Jez's pants.

With a roar of power, Jez pushed him back, reversing their positions, his hands pinning Cass's shoulders to the wall, his chest heaving as his breaths sawed out. Cass's own power flared to life in response, the angel pulling it all in, his eyes flaring up the same shade of blue that Cass's pseudo-wings had been.

"Sex is the last fucking thing you need, Cassius." Jez shook him, knocking Cass's head back against the wall. "Get your head straight. I'm trying to offer you comfort." He groaned and rested his forehead against Cass's. "It doesn't always equate to sex."

Cass squeezed his eyes closed. "Why?"

"You're allowed to want something other than sex," Jez said, pulling back. The angel's eyes were full of compassion, sapping the last of Cass's anger.

He closed his eyes again and let his head fall back against the wall. "I was asking why you'd offer me comfort."

It was the last fucking thing he deserved.

He’d lost count of how many times he’d indulged his lusts in front of the priestess. Now… he was remembering things. His mind was blurring her with his ghost—he’d felt a connection—he needed to understand.

For once, all he wanted was for it to mean something to him.

Then, enter the Huntsman. Fucking Dark Fae King laying claim to his priestess.

“Come to bed. I can feel your exhaustion, even if you’re repressing it yourself.” Jez said quietly, as though sensing Cass’s rioting thoughts.

He let Jez pull him out of the bathroom, holding his hand tight. He was exhausted. He hadn’t noticed it, but the angel was right. He’d been running on adrenaline for far too long now.

Both stumbled to a stop at the sight of Leira splayed out on Cass’s bed, covered in scraps of sheer material like a delectable sensual feast.

“Jez can you sleep in the other room tonight?” Cass whispered as he ran his hand down his face.

Leira scrambled to sit up and pulled a blanket over her chest, an adorable flush across her cheeks.

“You mean your future consort’s bedroom?” Jez said, pinching his mouth between his thumb and forefinger, trying to hide his grin. “Something you want to ask me, sweetheart?”

Cass snorted, cracking an unexpected smile as he elbowed Jez in the side. “Fuck just go.”

With a quick squeeze, Jez dropped his hand, walked over to the bed, stole a pillow and cockily sauntered through the door adjoining the bedrooms.

Cass walked to the bed, watching Leira’s reactions. She tensed at his first step, then softened with his next, by the time he was beside the bed, she had dropped the blanket, confident in her feminine wiles.

“You’ve returned,” Cass said as he crawled onto the bed, sitting up on his knees between her legs. Her face and chest were a nice rosy hue, the heat of her desire warming him.

“I haven’t been very good to you, have I?” He placed a hand on her knee, eyes fixed at the shadow of her cleft.

“You always make me feel good, my lord king,” she said with a sigh, dropping her knees to the side.

“I have a name,” Cass said, trailing his hands down her inner thighs, pushing back the filmy nightgown that covered her.

She smirked, and her silver eyes brightened, even as her lids lowered to shade them. “Cassius.”

His breath caught as a pang hit his chest. His name on her sweet lips...too familiar. He didn’t want to be thinking of His ghost right now. Too much confusion, his brain refused to process.

“You want me to take care of you, love?” He spoke the words, not worried about an answer as he lowered himself over her. He hooked his thumbs under the sides of her panties and pulled them off, then ran a fingertip down her folds, watching them swell and part for him.

“Yes. Please.” Her breaths were already coming short, panting, her hips lifting toward his touch.

With two fingers he spread her open, dipping inside of her to pull moisture up to her clit. He circled it slow, watching her body writhe with need. He felt her swell under his fingers and needed to feel it on his tongue.

This was familiar. He sucked at her slowly, lapping up her need, his hands gripping her thighs, pinning her in place.

Here he felt normal. Her hips pressed against his mouth.

Here he was wanted.

Her hands pulled at his hair, then tugged at his shoulders, trying to pull him up. He grinned against her wet heat, enjoying her desperate need for release.

It was his name she was moaning. She was dripping wet, her sweet nectar flooding his tongue.

All for him.

At the first twitches of her orgasm, he stopped. She moaned loudly, her eyes flashing, and he pressed two fingers inside, swiping his other arm across his mouth. She was swollen with need, tight and throbbing around his fingers.

“Am I still the only one...?” he whispered as he moved his body over hers, fingers slowly rubbing against her inner wall, stirring up her wetness, sensitizing her.

“Yes. Yes, only you. Only ever you.” Her head whipped back and forth, her hips rocking against his hand.

He breathed a heartfelt sigh. She, at least, was his. She’d chosen him.

He took out his fingers and plunged inside of her with one sure thrust.

She screamed hoarsely, coming before he could even pull back to thrust again, her legs anchoring around his waist, keeping him buried deep as she jerkily rocked against him.

He groaned, his legs shaking. “Yes, love.”

He pushed her hips down and pulled back to thrust deeper, harder, chasing down the fucking release that he’d been denied earlier.

“Fucking come all over me.” He needed to lose himself in it.

She continued to make sexy, panting moans, her orgasm throbbing through her, clenching around his cock, sucking at him.

With a low groan, he grabbed a fistful of her hair, kissing her roughly, tongue thrusting into her mouth with the same rhythm as his cock, his teeth scraping against her lips as he became frantic with need.

Need to get lost in this. The oblivion of his climax—if only for a brief moment he could be free.

Her little claws dug into his shoulders, tipping him over the edge.

When his climax hit, he roared with it, getting up to his knees, grabbing her hips and thrusting so hard the bed rattled against the wall.

He collapsed onto her, his body spent.

He lay his head against her chest, one hand still clasping her hip, still buried inside of her semi-erect. Sweat rolled off his forehead onto her collarbone and she giggled, swiping it away.

With a grunt and a lot of exaggerated movements, he shifted to lay beside her, tucking her up to his chest and falling asleep from one breath to the next.

He hadn’t even felt like he slept when he woke, heart pounding from the nightmare—or memory—a dull ache in his chest. Hurting. It was an actual physical ache.

He looked over to the pretty Erinyes, sleeping peacefully, her wings all tucked up under her. He had nothing more to give her. He needed someone to give to him for a change.

Without a word he eased out of bed, walking softly across the room, opening the door, shutting it quietly behind him. He snuck towards the bed and found Jez watching him with eyes gleaming in the dark.

He didn’t say anything, his mouth softened into a frown, he slid over and unfurled his wing and Cass climbed in and lay on it, letting down his guard for the first time in what felt like ages.

50

GRANTING THE GODS STRENGTH

PACE EVEN, SHE MOVED FOR THE PORTAL WHICH WAS ONLY HERS TO USE, it's doors wouldn't open to any but those carrying the imprint of the high priestess. Not by her design, it had simply been this way since the creation of their realm. For it led to the Zigurat e'zagmi, the Inner Sanctum.

Here, the essence of Asurim was housed and guarded, that sliver of magic taken from chaos, its primordial energy once powerful enough to sustain their realm and race.

It had been a gift of the God Anu to Amara's grandfather, the first warlock created from the mind of mortal men within ancient Sumer. It had bestowed upon them the ability to wield dark magic, and from it her grandfather had created Asurim, charging his descendants with the care over both realm and its essence.

Her grandfather had long since joined Anu, both god and warlock having faded into the ether after having been forgotten by the very same beings who once created them. The imagination and faith of mortal men made their feeble race the most powerful one in all the realms, and they didn't even realize it.

Heaven, Hell, and even the gods themselves were left at their mercy, for they all required faith to exist. It was fear, love and worship which kept them from the fading into non-existence. Yet mankind was fickler than even the gods they had created, and soon all had been abandoned and forgotten. Or so their fate would be, if not for Amara's intervention.

But her devotion did not come freely. Glorification restored divinity, with divinity came power, energy which could be harvested and poured back into Asurim. That was the price she demanded in payment from all the gods. All, save two.

With care she lit the candles placed meticulously upon the altar of her private shrine. He had forgotten them, so she made sure to remember them for him.

“Hail Inanna, Queen amongst the Ethers,
Accept this gift of light in honor of your radiance.
May your power burn as brightly as the sun.
To you I bow great Inanna, as I whisper your name to the winds for them to carry it beyond the realms and into eternity.”

Steady fingers lit the dried herbs within the bowl. The scent of sage, dragon’s blood and eucalyptus filling the Inner Sanctum as the plumes of smoke rose upward.

“Hail Avrogale, mother amongst the Ethers.
Accept this gift of essence in honor of your strength.
May your power glow as luminous as the moon.
To you I bow, great Avrogale, as I whisper your name to the waters.
For them to carry it beyond the realms and into eternity.”

She had called out to them often, they’d never once answered her. Perhaps she had performed the rites incorrectly and her prayers never reached them. Or perhaps she had been too late, and the fade had already claimed both goddesses.

Even if she never heard from them, she would continue her prayers.

The sin-eater had forgotten, but she would always remember the stories about his mother, his grandmother. And she would always remember *him.*

Amara remained kneeled before the altar even long after the candles had extinguished and the last of the herbs had burned away.

“Hail Cassius, lost prince of the ethers…”

As I give you my hand to hold

So I give you my life to keep.

To love faithfully through the best and the worst.

Blood of my blood, and bone of my bone...

And there she stayed until the dawn approached, remembering him from the shadows. Ensuring the fade would never find her demon.

51

MIGHT LEAVE A MARK

SHE WAS HOT AND PULSING AROUND HIS FINGERS, HER JUICES TRAILING INTO the palm of his hand. Her moans were raspy by this point, it was the third orgasm he'd wrung from her.

Anger still burned hot, kept alive by memories that slammed into him every time he let down his guard.

Taking it out on the pretty Leira eased him. He was comfortable here.

"Can't... no more," she moaned, her body limp.

But she could. Her flesh was so swollen with need, it wouldn't take much to bring her up again.

He took out his fingers, tapping one on her bottom lip.

"Take it." He groaned when her tongue met the tip of his finger. "You're going to take what I give you until I say it's enough."

Her lips wrapped around his finger, tongue circling it, licking it clean, her silvery eyes defiantly watching his. He groaned deep in his chest, his hand, sticky with her juices, moved down her neck to cup her breast, his mouth crashing onto hers.

She broke off the kiss, panting against his mouth as her hand traveled down his chest and wrapped around his erection. With determination shining bright, she pushed at his shoulder and tugged at his cock, forcing him onto his back.

She gave him a blinding smile, and climbed over his waist, her wings unfurling as she lowered her head. Hells and he loved those wings.

He reached out to feel the velvety softness, choking out a gasp as she sucked him into her mouth with no warning. No prelude, or niceties… his hips shot up, his hand weaving through her hair.

That was it then, he was going to get no mercy…

Her untutored enthusiasm had his stomach muscles clenching, his release hovering around the peripheries. Her hand gripped him hard, her mouth taking him in until her lips met her fist and he was snug against the back of her throat.

She was determined—and he tried to relax and give into her ministrations…

“Cass I…” Jez swept into the room, frustration oozing from him. “Shit. Oh— sorry.” He started backing into his own room.

Cass gripped Leira’s hair tighter when she made signs of stopping. She couldn’t stop now…

“Just give me a bit Jez,” Cass said, dismissing the red-faced angel.

Leira bit down, just enough that Cass eased his hand to let her up.

“I don’t think I actually do make you lose your mind, do I?” Her eyes blazed with ire.

His mind wasn’t his to lose.

“Keep going,” Cass rasped out. “I was close.”

Doubt shone in her eyes, but her pretty pink tongue ran across the tip of him. He cupped the back of her head again, encouraging her into a rhythm, focusing on his release.

He could still taste her on his lips, still craved more—her lust was thick and heavy in the room and he was satiated to the point of laziness. More than happy to let her finish him off with her mouth.

“Just going to the shower, not seeing anything!” Jez called out, his air of frustration replaced with embarrassed amusement.

White hot pain tore down Cass’s side, trailing in the wake of Leira’s claws as they tore through his flesh, down through layers of muscle. His mind went blank, the shockwave of pain stealing his breath, his hand fisting in her hair, pushing her head down and ramming his cock down her throat as he came with hot spasms of ecstasy blended with agony—the sweet relief of mindlessness.

He let out a hoarse groan, rocking into her mouth, waves of his orgasm still rippling through his body.

When his thoughts re-composed, anger started buzzing. He lifted Leira off him, the pleased smile on her sated face notching the anger up even more. Without a word, he climbed out of the bed and slammed into the bathroom, ignoring Jez's shouts and dropping bottles.

He turned to look at his side in the mirror, the pain blazing, but he couldn't see all the damage, it was the wrong angle. He could see inside some of the gouges, and fucking hated how much he'd enjoyed that. Hated that part of himself.

He opened doors, hissing with each movement of his arm, blood running down his entire side — damn it he knew he had bandages here. Jez stepped up behind him pressing him up against the wall, gasping when he got a full view of Cass's side.

"What the fuck, Cass?" Jez lifted his arm to get a better look at the deep scratches.

"I think… she was startled?" Cass said, trying to gather his thoughts. His mind was still floating with euphoria.

Jez pushed him into the still running shower. "Wash. You smell like you bathed in her sex."

Cass turned his head back to smirk at the angel, whose expression was dark.

"Wash off those cuts," Jez said, his jaw ticking. "I'm going to go… send her on her way. Then I'll get that fixed up for you."

He gingerly washed the area, his body starting to quake as the adrenaline washed out, nausea churning up as his head grew light.

He didn't remember sitting down, but there was Jez, pulling him up to his feet once more. He stood there in silence, letting Jez towel him off and wrap him up in gauze and tape, then followed him when Jez grabbed his arm and led him back to the bedroom. Jez's bedroom.

Cass lay on the bed, throwing an arm over his face, and Jez sat beside him, propped against the headboard.

"Mephistopheles has agreed to your visit," Jez said, voice devoid of emotion. "He has terms. Ridiculous ones. But Levistus and I will be allowed to join you."

Cass nodded, not sure he wanted to know all the terms.

"He's been an uncertain ally of my father's since beginning times."

"He's… odd," Jez said, pulling Cass closer. "Are you certain that was accidental?" His hand brushed up Cass's side to the bottom of the

bandages.

Cass closed his eyes and dropped his arm. It had been—just a fluke.

“She doesn’t know— well, she does now.” He swallowed, trying to get moisture back into his throat. “That I…like…that.”

“Do you then.” Jez looked down at him, anger bright in his eyes. “Cause I didn’t get that you liked it. From where I stood, you looked wrecked.”

“Had worse,” Cass said with a shrug. “It just caught me off guard.”

Jez growled so softly, Cass might’ve been mistaken that he did at all. He slid down the bed, laying on his side to face Cass, pulling Cass’s head onto his shoulder as they faced each other.

A knock sounded at the door and Cass stiffened, his body strung taut with adrenaline. Jez moved off the bed and made his way to the door, glancing over his shoulder with a look of concern before swinging it open to an angry looking Levistus.

He swept past Jez, his eyes immediately drawn to the bandages up Cass’s side.

“That happen during the ceremony?” Levistus asked, moving to the desk to fix himself a drink, giving it a careful sniff before slugging it back in one toss.

Cass sat up, Jez settling beside him, keeping him propped up. Hells and he was done. Adrenaline spent, his body felt boneless.

“Nope,” he answered Levistus, growing concerned when his advisor refilled his glass for the third time. “Fresh wounds. Why would you think I’d return injured from a fertility rite?”

Levistus turned and pinned him with an intense glare, saying nothing for long enough to make things uncomfortable.

“Were you with her?”

Cass preferred the discomfort of his silence.

A fresh wave of pain knocked the breath from his lungs, and Jez’s arm wrapping around his shoulder told him it wasn’t imaginary.

“No.” His voice cracked, he stopped talking.

“What did you want?” Jez asked Levistus with an exasperated sigh. “He needs rest.”

Levistus bared his fangs, his obsidian eyes flaring silver. “I need to know who she was with.”

Jealousy hit Cass so fierce it caused bile to rise in his throat. What fucking business of it was his anyway?

“She didn’t want me.” Cass snarled with rage bubbling up from the pit of his soul. “She won’t want you. Her and the Fae King seem to be working things out.” His throat went completely dry, choking off any other words that tried to spew out.

Levistus shoved a drink in his hand. “Drink.” He turned to Jez and made a jerking motion with his head towards the door.

Cass drank down his port and felt more than the burn of alcohol. He’d laced it with something.

His eyes wouldn’t stay open, his body slumping onto his pillows in a heap. Sleeping potion? His ears rang, he floated in surreal languor, Jez and Levistus’s conversation floating back to him like a dream.

“Namtar was there.” Levistus sounded less angry and more concerned.

Dreaming.

Always of you-

“How we are supposed to save him from himself…” Jez sounded angry too. “...mind is a mess.”

“...death god… finding a way out…”

“*When we’re free, no one will use us again.”* Her fingers wrapped through his, clinging tight with reassurance.

“*My soul ‘til our lives should be done.”*

“Just sleep Cass.” Jez was back, wrapping an arm and a wing over him. “Sleep easy. I’ll listen out tonight, so you can just sleep.”

He wouldn’t have to worry about him sneaking into his room tonight. He had a guardian angel.

52

AND THE MONSTERS, THEY WERE BEAUTIFUL

A GREAT HULKING BEAST SAT UPON MEPHISTOPHELES'S THRONE, UPON A dais that sat high enough to overlook every corner of the cavernous room. Red skinned, bulbous horns, with an expression that spoke of fathomless depths of ennui. If a beast could be endowed with emotion, that is.

Its black eyes gleamed with curiosity as Cassius approached, followed by Jez at his left and Levistus at his right, all of them dressed impeccably in suits, as per one of the meeting requirements. The beast didn't sit up, merely tapping its fingers across the arm of the seat.

The throne room was otherwise empty, the lush red carpet leading up to the throne clear of petitioners, unusual for a ruler in the Hells. Cass's own throne room was never without armed soldiers, wayward demons seeking assistance, seeking favor… always in need.

They stopped at the bottom step of the formidable dais, Cass giving the creature a brief nod of acknowledgement. He wasn't about to show subservience. Even if nerves were eating him up inside.

"I'd wondered," the beast spoke with a deep rasp, one that made hairs stand up on the back of Cass's neck. Dark promises and smooth seduction. "What sort of creature would come out of Asmodeus breeding with the descendant of Inanna. You don't disappoint." The creature stared at Cass's chest, as though it could see parts of him that he'd never admit to.

He could feel Jez's emotions, so loud they were screaming in his head. Disgust. Rage. Sorrow.

“I’d wondered if I’d met you before,” Cass said, easing back so he didn’t have to continue looking up. He wondered if this beast was Mephistopheles. The first fallen angel, Lucifer himself.

Pointed white teeth gleamed in the semblance of a smile. “And what desperation drives you to seek my lowly assistance?”

And so it was. It took everything Cass had to school his features and hide his shock.

“You guard the only gate to the Nessus. Is it not reasonable that I ensure it stands secure?” Cass asked, catching the arrogance in his tone a tad too late.

The creature did sit up at that. Swiftly and with menace.

“Are you casting doubt, spawn of Asmodeus?” The beast stood, forcing Cass to look up once again.

Cass shifted his feet, widening his stance protectively, Jez humming with pent up energy, Levistus the only one of them at ease.

“Do you expect me to blindly have faith?” Cass scoffed.

The very thing you fought against, he wanted to add, but managed to restrain himself. Allies. He needed allies, not to piss off the most powerful of the Archdeacons.

The creature smiled again in that odd, disarming manner. Then laughed. Softly at first, turning into a booming chuckle.

“You are an arrogant bastard,” Mephistopheles said, humor still glinting in his eyes. “Brash and disrespectful. I like it. Much more straightforward than dealing with your sire.”

Cass let out the breath he was holding. “Will you have talks with us then?”

The creature inclined his head and moved down the steps of the dais. “I agreed, did I not? I don’t go back on my word. Bad for business, that.”

“I just came—” Cass’s words were cut off when Mephistopheles raised his hand in a slicing motion, gesturing around the room.

“We’ll take this into my private rooms,” the beast said, motioning them to follow.

Cass finally took a good look around, he hadn’t noticed the damned souls decorating the walls, or the ones holding up tables—the damned furniture was made up of the damned…

A few steps into the hall and the beast melted down into a man. The horns gone, the skin gleaming golden, heavy black wings flashing briefly

at his back before they too disappeared.

The man that now walked in front of them was dressed in a tailored suit with a top hat and walking cane—much like the one Asmodeus kept his Ruby Rod sheathed in—and had a blinding beauty that put even Basileus to shame.

Cass wasn't sure which was the glamour.

He offered them seats at a large table in a room with two walls made of windows. The windows let in the orange glow of the pits, making the dark walls gleam. The chairs were comfortable—a little too comfortable to be dealing business from. Hard to stay sharp when you were too relaxed.

Fortunately, not a problem for Cass, he was so keyed up from his own nerves and Jez's chaotic emotions.

Mephistopheles studied him, his eyes kept snagging on his chest as though he were trying to get a good look but pretending he wasn't. All in all, he was being obvious about studying Cass. They sat in silence with nothing to occupy them, each lost in their own thoughts. Cass left wondering what the hell the demon was thinking.

"So very often," Mephistopheles said, finally breaking the silence. "I've seen the fallout from the offering of the firstborn child. I personally don't make compacts of that sort. Children are innocent of their parent's sins, after all."

"Very decent of you old chap," Levistus said, leaning back into his clasped hands, "but you should stop now."

Mephistopheles shot him a look Cass couldn't decipher, then took off his hat and dusted off the top with dramatic flourish.

"I'd like to know where you were leading with that statement," Cass said, scowling at Levistus and leaning forward onto his elbows.

Azure eyes peeked up from absurdly long lashes as Mephistopheles looked over to Levistus before dismissing him and looking back to Cass.

"Your mother sought her family's power to be returned. The old gods, long forgotten, wither in their immortality. Powerless. Useless." The demon's eyes were hypnotic as was his voice. "Power your father has basked in for millennia. It was really only a matter of time before a grasp was made to take back what was theirs…"

"Stop speaking, Lucifer," Levistus hissed.

The demon shrugged, turning his attention briefly to Jez, his features softening for an instant before shifting back into that mocking smirk that

seemed etched on his face.

“Can’t help but be intrigued by the by-product of such deals, Levistus,” Mephistopheles said as he snapped his fingers.

Worn souls entered the room carrying trays, setting them down with a groveling bow, keeping their eyes lowered and backing out of the room as stealthily as they entered.

“Did she regret it?” Cass mused, ignoring the serving of refreshments.

He wasn’t so slow that he hadn’t picked up on the subtext of the non-conversation. They spoke of his mother. He’d probed, scraped, searched his memories for any trace of the woman that birthed him, was always met with blinding headaches and emptiness. They knew who she was. And Levistus was trying to change the subject.

“She would have to be a stone-cold bitch not to,” Mephistopheles said as he tapped his spoon on the side of his tea cup. “Help yourselves. It’s not poisoned.”

Cass poured himself a cup of tea as a show of good faith. Even if it were poisoned, he was immune to all but the worst of them, thanks to his Priestess’s offerings over the years. All the times… no. He wasn’t going to think of her. He rubbed away the ache in his chest, willing the intruding thoughts away.

“Perhaps she left that all with you,” Mephistopheles said, watching Cass closely again, eyes wandering to his chest then back up. “The demon boy-king with the protection of an ancient and bygone goddess.”

“The King needs to know who stands at his side,” Levistus said, his voice a growl, “you’re his last line of defense against internal attacks.”

“And the King is expecting to war with his own denizens?” Mephistopheles sipped his tea, his eyes bright with amusement as he looked over the rim of his cup.

“The King.” Cass sat up, letting his rage leak into his tone, “will be prepared for any circumstance.”

“You once had compassion,” Jez finally spoke, “felt love. Have you gone so far to the dark that you’ve forgotten where you came from?”

The beast flashed back into existence long enough to snarl at the angel. “Do not.” Mephistopheles’s hand shook as he set his tea cup into the saucer, hot liquid splashing over the sides. “Refer to things your malleable mind cannot comprehend. You’ve had your own will for how long, Jez’Piel?”

Jez’s jaw dropped in shock.

“I was created with a will of my own. Free to decide. The fact that my decisions were deemed wrong…” the demon’s chest heaved, actual flames lighting up his fingertips.

“Your decisions caused a war the heavens still haven’t recovered from,” Jez snarled out.

“I have enemies.” Cass cut in, diverting Mephistopheles’s attention. “Some inherited, some of my own making. I need to know who stands on my side. I hoped that you of all of them would stand against my father’s return.”

Mephistopheles snorted, relaxing back into his chair, once more the affable gentleman.

“The tides have turned. Asmodeus was growing feeble, stretching himself too thin—reaching for more power was a terribly unreasonable thing to do since the power he wielded was already warping his mind.”

“His mind was unstable because of the power?” Cass asked, leaning toward the other demon. Could this be what was going on with his own mind? His new influx of power *was* unstable...

Mephistopheles met his eyes directly. “Your father had his finger in too many pots. Trusted none. Felt nothing. You, though—as arrogant and brash as you are, have heart.” His eyes moved to Cass’s chest, as though looking through him to the organ in question. “Don’t let this realm rot your mind.”

It was Cass’s turn to scoff. “My mind was never my own.”

Levistus groaned, slapping his hand to his mouth, stopping it too late.

“I’ll stand by you,” Mephistopheles said, looking at Levistus with open curiosity. “Until you prove otherwise, you’re showing a cunning in thinking outside of the box, so they say.” He pointed a finger up. “Binding yourself to a celestial. Taking on an advisor that knows all the inner workings of the politics. Establishing Fae connections on the material plane. Yes. Clever young creature.”

Cass hadn’t gone out of his way to make any of those decisions, but he would accept credit. Things had been set up exactly as the fallen angel said—but more that they’d fallen into his lap.

“Your sister will make for a nasty enemy, Cassius,” Mephistopheles looked him over with an arch of his brow.

It was Cass’s turn to be shocked.

“Still have spies everywhere,” Levistus chuckled.

“It suits me to do so.” Mephistopheles inclined his head. “I’ll pledge my armies, but there is a warlock I want in return.”

Cass shook his head, his brows a permanent furrow by this point. “Warlock?”

“Yes, Prince of Lust. I get lonely. There is a warlock I want. I need introductions.”

“You want me… as a dating service?” Cass was dumbfounded. Of all the shit he could’ve been asked to do…

“You’ll bring me to your Priestess’s temple, she’ll make introductions.” Mephistopheles nodded, satisfied with himself.

“I uh…” Cass’s stomach clenched. He hadn’t seen her since Ostara. Nope. He wasn’t going to think of that.

“They have to stay apart,” Levistus said, his voice cold.

“So says you.” Mephistopheles glared at Levistus then turned back to Cass.

“I’ll see to it,” Cass said quietly, not trusting his voice.

“Why her? Can’t you just tell Cass the name of the warlock? He could summon her,” Jez said, reaching across the table to grab Cass’s hand, the motion followed by Mephistopheles’s glowing blue eyes.

“Is the boy going to let his feelings dictate his rule?” Mephistopheles’s tone was warning.

“Course not,” Cass said with assurance, getting to his feet. He was done. He couldn’t do this anymore. He didn’t want to think. Didn’t want to remember.

“As I thought.” Mephistopheles got to his feet as well, offering his hand to Cass in a handshake.

Cass took it after a minute hesitation, bracing himself. The surge of energy between the two of them was almost… pleasant. He felt like Jez. Warm and reassuring. Cass sensed no malicious intent.

“Geyron and Beelzebul are staunch allies of Glasya. Stay clear of their realms.” Mephistopheles spoke low, for Cass’s ears only. “Don’t be a stranger.”

The amount of mortal colloquialisms the fallen angel used told Cass just how much time he spent with humans. Rumor had it he watched the mortal realm the same way humans watched soap operas. Whatever amused. After all those years, it was probably all he had left.

Cass breathed a little easier back in his own room. Relief that was over—that it went as well as it did, and with the knowledge that he had some defense lined up. He'd worry about introductions to Amara when he needed to, for tonight, he drove all thoughts of her from his mind and relaxed into his sofa, grabbing a book off the tea table and kicking up his feet.

53

IMPRESSIVE, IN SPITE OF

"THE NUMBERS ARE IMPRESSIVE DOMINUS MALACHI. THE REPORTED incidents of violence between warlock and gargoyle are but a fraction of what was anticipated."

Amara had traveled to the Dominium of Acides, one of the nine continents of Asurim, to oversee the progress reports with Dominus Malachi. The work and change of atmosphere a welcome distraction from her own mind, which kept returning to the celebration of Ostara, and that look of betrayal which had shone from within coal dark eyes.

"Abolishing gargoyle slavery and ending two millennia of prejudice is no small task, Sarratum-sa. Fortunately, the steady influx of wealth and infernal energy has left many denizens more open minded towards interracial tolerance. As long as it works to their benefit, of course."

"Greed triumphs over hate." She sounded sullen even to her own ears.

"Claim any victory you can Sarratum, even if its taste is bitter rather than sweet." Dominus Malachi was sitting opposite her, both buried deeply within the piles of ledgers cluttering the desk.

His office was bright, the midday sun casting purple rays of light through the large window panels. Around the room rich tapestries were displayed against walls carved from quartz stone. The furniture a classic style combining heavy iron and dark wood, the chairs they occupied worn, but comfortable.

"It won't be a victory until there are no more names listed on these reports." She scanned the ledgers, reading off the names of victims who

had been subjected to the illegal practice of blood cleansing. A chillingly familiar term inscribed upon the page caught her attention.

“An abomination donated to the institute — is this about Maleficus? Did you discover what happened to his parents?” They had been searching for them, hoping they could help shed some light on the mystery regarding his conception.

It was Malachi’s turn to grimace as he looked up from his documents.

“Yes, that was my main reason for asking you to join me here today. From what we were able to gather, the boy’s mother, a warlock, was subjected to the cleansing ritual after giving birth to what her parents considered to be an abomination. She died after having been exposed to Hexafire.”

Amara let out an exasperated groan, which her dominus chose to ignore as he continued.

“The father, a gargoyle was executed publicly on the presumably false charge of rape. His body was quartered and placed on display outside the girl’s parental home. The grandparents then donated the infant to the institute for research under the vow that his parentage would never be made public knowledge, sparing the family the burden of shame.”

With a heavy sense of defeat Amara’s head fell into her palms, elbows leaning heavily upon the wooden desk. Slavery and purging, antiquated practices which her people clung to even though she had declared them illegal years ago.

“These blood cleansings have to stop Malachi. We finally had a warlock female successfully conceive, and they murdered her for it. This is madness!”

Slavery only succeeded to divide, rather than unite their people. And blood cleansings were nothing more than a purge, a way for society to rid itself of individuals considered unworthy. Most of the victims were warlocks with no crime other than their magick simply failing to awaken. Or gargoyles who broke free from their clans wishing for a life of their own. As soon as one stood accused of bringing shame to the family name, the blood cleansing rite could be called upon. The victim would die a gruesome death, the act cleansing away the shame wrought upon their family.

The list of names before her stood evidence to the fact that change wasn’t swift enough, and still she was being met with resistance at every

turn.

“How fares young Maleficus?” She had been so caught up with the sin-eater that she hadn’t paid due attention to the boy’s progress. Dominus Oberith and Er-Agate had seen to all his needs before sending him off to the Academy of magic.

As her ward, the boy would be kept safe and well cared for, of this she had no doubt. But Maleficus had been a prisoner of the institute since infancy and sudden freedom could be frightening. She understood that perfectly.

When she lifted her head, it was to find her dominus staring at her with a curious expression, an easy smile upturning the corner of his lips.

“I could summon for head-magister Kadeon from the Acides academy, he would be able to answer any questions you have regarding the progress of young Maleficus. Or...” An excited glint sparked within his hazel eyes. “We could go to the academy and have you determine the boy’s wellbeing for yourself.”

She scrunched her nose at him “Am I truly that obvious?”

“Only to those who know to pay attention, highness.” Again he smiled, a disarming gesture which had served to elevate Malachi to one of her favorite advisors. He was clever, loyal and shockingly compassionate for one of warlock heritage. Which was good, it balanced his notoriously mercurial temperament.

“I am not so sure it’s a good idea, Dominus. Having me show up at his school won’t exactly aid the illusion of a normal childhood.”

“With all due respect highness, Maleficus will never have a normal childhood or life. He’ll be met with prejudice everywhere he goes. If anything, your support will help ease that burden by forcing society to accept him.”

“I would like to visit the academy.” She could speak with his magisters and caretakers, but meeting with Maleficus himself was perhaps too great a risk. Already she thought of him fondly, which placed him at risk from Namtar as much as anyone else allowed too close.

“We shall go, but please make it so the boy is not aware of my visit. Oh, Agate,” an idea took hold as she beckoned for her first attendant, reaching for a pen and paper before quickly scribbling down instructions. “Have these volumes retrieved from my private collection and meet us at the academy as soon as you can.”

Not twenty minutes later she and her entourage were being escorted along the long halls of the academy. “My apologies highness, morning classes tend to be a bit chaotic, and I believe word of your presence has caused a bit of a stir amongst faculty.”

Head-magister Kadeon had been gracious and welcoming from the moment they had arrived, despite his obvious bewilderment at her sudden visit.

“My apologies for the unexpected intrusion upon your schedule Head-magister, we won’t be taking up much of your time. I merely wish to see the boy, but rest assured I have no intentions of distracting him from his daily routine. In fact, I would prefer it if Maleficus was not made aware of my visit.”

She followed the head-magister into a secluded wing of the academy, the number of guards posted significantly larger, and the students much younger of age.

“According to schedule young Maleficus is currently at recess. You’ll be out of view within the alcove, he won’t know you were here until you’ve already departed the academy grounds.”

Doors were opened to a small terrace, framed by a pergola thickly overgrown with ivy, providing shelter from the bright sunlight while hiding her from view. From here she could see a courtyard with a small group of children scattered about. Her gaze was instantly drawn to the solitary figure of a scrawny boy, busy with doodling figures upon the ground. His hair still an unruly mop, with two small horns peeking out.

After a moment she realized he was in fact not doodling, but drawing neat circles upon the soil.

“Summoning is a skill too advanced for one his age, is it not?”

The head-magister’s chest puffed up proudly. “It is, but young Maleficus has frightened his magisters a few times by coming very close to succeeding. Although I doubt he knew what he was summoning. The boy possesses an astounding ability for magic.”

Pride filled her as she kept her gaze fixed upon the huddled form of the child, watching in fascination as he diligently drew circle after circle.

“Yes, he is quite magnificent is he not?”

“*Our children will have your eyes, Assat Sa”*

“*And your smile, vir meus”*

“Highness are you all right?”

Amara shook her head, her hand blindly reaching out to the pergola for support. “It’s nothing.” A lie.

The memories were growing more frequent and too persistent, no longer haunting just her dreams, but invading her thoughts.

His fingers tentatively closed around her elbow, and she allowed it. Malachi’s concerned voice sounding low enough so only she could hear, “Sarratum Sa, you’re pale as a ghost. Did you perhaps have a vision?”

“No visions Dominus, we both know visions aren’t my strong suit, only ghosts. Please don’t concern yourself, I am well.”

“Let me fetch you some—”

A scream tore through the courtyard, all of them turning their attention back to the children, discovering a fight broken out among them. The scream had come from a young girl, encircled by a group of larger children who were pulling at a stuffed toy she was desperately clinging to.

The scream turned to crying when the girl fell to the ground, encouraging the largest child to kick her in the stomach while quickly snatching up the stuffed animal.

“Damnation, is this sort of behavior typical of your students?” Mara growled at the head-magister who looked on in dismay.

He was about to take a step towards the children when her Dominus pulled her back. “Wait, let’s see what he does...”

Maleficus had turned upon hearing her cry, his grey skin darkening as he looked down at the small figure crying on the ground. Before any of them realized his intention, he rushed for the boy who was currently holding her doll.

-CRUNCH-

A howl of pain followed the all too familiar sound of shattering bone before the boy ran off. “He broke my nose!”

Maleficus reached for the doll, yet rather than return it to the girl as Amara expected, the lout stuffed it into his pocket and nonchalantly sauntered back to where he’d been practicing his circles.

“Well, there’s no denying he has warlock in him....” Mara muttered under her breath.

“Yet that sucker punch is definitely gargoyle inherited.” She rolled her eyes at Malachi’s chuffed bolster. “What? It was a solid punch.”

“Laugh it up Dominus, just know that if he gets expelled, I’m making you his babysitter.”

Her attention was caught by Agate's return, the stack of books she carried in her arms causing a tingle of excitement. It wasn't until she saw Agate's own shocked expression that she turned around to follow her attendant's gaze, to find Maleficus himself standing right in front of her, arms stubbornly to his sides.

"Sarratum, I knew you would come to see me!"

Mara's brows shot up, shock making way for amusement at the smug expression on the small boy. "Did you then, young warlock?"

When she addressed him by the title, he beamed up at her with pride. "Yes, because I'm your ward."

"Clever boy indeed." How could anyone ever mistake such a marvelous creature for an abomination?

"For you Sarratum-sa." His small hand shot out, holding up the toy he'd pilfered in offering to her.

She glowered at both Malachi and Kadeon when she heard soft sniggers of laughter behind her back. Then hunched down to tentatively take the dirty toy he offered.

"Thank you Maleficus, you did very well against those bullies."

He gave her a nonchalant shrug. "I know." His smile twisted into a prideful grin. His attitude was so similar to that of her demon when he had been just a boy, stubbornly refusing to accept her pleas to stay away from the dungeons and from her.

"You're sad. Who made you sad?"

She hadn't realized her attention had drifted off until his angry tone pulled her back into the moment, only to find him staring up at her with a murderous expression.

"You're imagining things." Placing her hand upon his small shoulders she turned him around, facing him in the direction of the beaten girl. She'd curled into herself, refusing to move despite the caregivers who were trying to comfort her, her tear-filled eyes fixated upon the doll held in Amara's hand.

"Maleficus, did you truly want this toy?"

He shook his head. "No, I just wanted them to stop fighting. Their screaming messes up my circles."

Mara couldn't stop herself from running her fingers through wild looking curls of his hair. "See how sad she is? There's no reason for her to remain that way. Go make it right, Maleficus."

He stared at her for a long time, that stubborn expression turning to understanding. “Who’s gonna make it right with you?”

“Cheeky warlock, go do as I say. And if you can get her to smile, I’ll have a reward for you.”

Without further need for encouragement, he grabbed the toy from her open hand and sped off towards the forlorn looking girl. All of them watching intently as he placed the toy at her feet. When realizing he was returning her precious toy to her, her tears dried up and Maleficus was rewarded with a beaming smile.

Headmagister Kadeon came to stand at her side. “The girl is homesick, that stuffed doll was a parting gift from her mother. The caretakers have been trying to pry it away from her for weeks to have it washed, without much success it would seem.”

It only took a few moments before an overly excited Maleficus returned to her side. “I did it, gimmie!”

“Am I to assume you’re referring to your reward?”

He practically bounced as he nodded, and from the corner of her eye Amara caught the young girl curiously approaching, holding the dirty and torn toy clutched to her chest.

Agate came to stand on her other side, handing her one of the books she’d retrieved.

“These once belonged to my sister Calista, she was very smart, just like you. She used to read them to me in the hopes of making me fall asleep, it worked. I suspect you’ll enjoy them as much as she did.”

He stared awestruck at the leather-bound volume she placed in his shaking hands, causing him to nearly drop it when a second pair of hands quickly reached out, saving the book from tumbling onto the ground.

“And what is your name then young lady?”

She flustered and stumbled, and it was only after a nudge from Maleficus that she found her courage. “Cora.”

Mara moved to hunch down to eye level with both. “I’ll expect you to make some progress with these books, warlock. And as for you young Cora, I believe your doll is in desperate need of a bath and repair. If you love something you need to take care of it, even if that means letting go.”

The bell tower in the distance chimed once more, announcing that recess had come to an end.

“Isn’t there a class you two should be attending at this time? If you run late, you’ll both be put on cleaning duty.” The headmagister’s stern tone was belied by the smile he wore when accepting the remaining books from Agate.

At the threat of manual labor both children bolted off to join their class, one clutching a heavy but much cherished book in his arms, the other holding a torn and dirty but much-loved toy to her chest.

Maleficus glanced back at her “I’ll study a lot, and I’ll make it right, I promise!”

As soon as they were out of sight, her head dropped into her hands, as she let out a frustrated groan. “That certainly didn’t go as planned.”

She caught Agate’s snort of laughter and Dominus Malachi’s bemused tone, “indeed, I think it went much better.”

She let out a breath, deciding to focus on the small piece of happiness this day offered, rather than the fears which accompanied her.

“Yes, I dare say it did.”

54

WHERE'D YOU LEARN TO DO THAT?

"PLEASE." LEIRA GAVE HIM A PRETTY POUT, HOLDING THE ROPES UP. "I want to try new things, Cassius. Unless," her gaze turned calculating, "you want me to go to someone else?"

All the Hells and he didn't really care. Something inside of him was dead. He was numb, walking around observing his life from somewhere outside of his body. The nightmares and memories were relentless, blue eyes and bars imprinted in his mind's eye, his craving for his priestess going hand-in-hand with the intensity of the memories, blaring with urgency—something he was forgetting, something his mind was trying to remind him of.

But she belonged to him. The one female he had that was all his.

"Okay, you can tie my hands up, but loosely. And when I say enough that'll be it." The thought of it had dread churning up. He didn't like to be restrained. "But no blindfold. Just… no."

She was untutored and had been a virgin when she came to him, it wouldn't be as bad as… he shook his head and put a firm clamp on those memories.

He lay on the bed, body stiff. He wasn't even sure if he could get hard at this point. Then her soft thighs straddled his waist… and there it was. His body clearly disagreed with his racing mind.

She tied the rough ropes around his wrists, loosely, like he'd asked. He should've thought to tell her to use something other than hemp — the slightest struggle and he'd have rope burns.

Her eyes gleamed with mischief, and something darker, forgotten once her naked body slid down his. She pressed soft kisses down his chest, over his abs, her tongue dipping to caress the hollows, his body relaxing and tensing all at once.

He wanted to feel her wetness—all he felt was the frustration of not being able to move his hands.

"I think there'll be payback for this, love," he said, a bit breathless as her tongue met the tip of his cock. "...fuck you without mercy."

She smiled up at him as her lips wrapped around him. Fucking erotic is what it was. Her long pale hair spilled over his hips, her ruby lips stretched over his throbbing erection.

He wanted to bury his fingers in her. He wanted his mouth sucking up her juices—that he could see gathering at the tops of her thighs…

Her cheeks hollowed as she pulled her mouth back, sucking so hard his hips shot up to follow.

"Fuck." He groaned roughly. "Yes. Just like that."

Her mouth was gone, replaced by her tongue. "Shh. You're not supposed to talk." Her eyes lit up. "Can I gag you?"

"Hells, love—why?" Cass's heart was already picking up speed, every time he moved and felt the restraints—a sick feeling tearing at his guts.

"Your words make me lose concentration, I'm going to be in control tonight." She licked up the valley between his abs. "Please?" She kissed him gently before pressing her finger to his lips.

"Touch yourself first," Cass whispered against her finger. "I need to taste you. Then I'll let you…"

Her eyelids dropped heavily, and her breath came out on a gusty sigh. He couldn't see her hand, couldn't move to adjust her so he could see…

She held her fingers to his lips, quieting his racing heart as he lost himself in the scent of her—a lick and a suck—and the taste of her. She pressed her cheek against his, her fingers easing out of his mouth. She kissed his jaw, then his chin, finally his lips.

He dipped his tongue into her mouth, running it along the inside of her bottom lip, where the skin was slippery silk, and over her tongue, enough to taste her desire.

She broke the kiss suddenly, panting, and gave him a wicked grin before plucking up the scrap of material she intended to blindfold him with.

He held his breath and lifted his head to give her enough access to tie a knot.

He had immediate regrets.

A cold sweat prickled across his skin, his heart trying to beat out of his chest. And fuck it all, he was still hard as a rock.

“I love how wicked you are,” she whispered as she sat up and trailed her fingers down his chest. “I want to make you lose your mind for me.”

Her dagger-sharp claws sunk into his chest.

He growled out a warning against the flimsy material binding his mouth.

His chest burned. His heart raced. His hips were rocking up, seeking her wet heat.

Damned traitorous body.

“Oh yes,” she sighed as she eased down onto his erection, his body screaming from the blurred lines of pain and ecstasy. “I figured out how to make you lose it completely, my King.” Her words came out as pants as he filled her completely.

She took him in fully. He always held himself back, he knew he was large enough to hit the wrong spots, but she spread her thighs and sunk down on him, shifting herself until she was sitting flush on his hips, his balls touching her ass.

He groaned, a ragged sound tore from his chest, then she lifted herself an inch—another inch—and slammed back down.

“Mmph.” His roar came out muffled against the gag.

“Yes. I want to feel all of you,” she moaned out just as raggedly.

Then her claws tore down his chest.

His vision went white. Agony ripped through him, so intense that every nerve in his body screamed to life.

She slammed down again.

His mind blanked.

She took out her buried claws and he cried out—he wasn’t sure if it was from the pain—or the pleasure. Adrenaline spiked through him, his body hitting that state of bliss, the one he constantly chased.

Then her palms came down on the gouges, pressing hard and running up the length.

Too much.

Without thought, his hands flew down, only to be stopped up short. The ropes tightened around his wrists— he felt something pop—

The damned female had used slipknots…

Agony blinded him, overriding the bliss.

Pain shot from his wrist to his shoulder, pounding through his chest.

"You'll remember this," his father was saying, "you know why, Cassius?"

Basileus held him. Kissing him. Fondling him as his bones snapped.

His father's face loomed over his. "Because pain is the best teacher. The memory of pain lingers long after other lessons are forgotten."

Bas gripped his cock tightly, and to his shame, he felt himself spend, all over his own stomach, his body a broken, shameful mess.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Jez's voice roared through the room, and Cass's mind blinked back.

"Get off him. Get out." Jez yelled, pulling the pretty girl from his lap.

"Cassius, your sister…" Levistus flung open the door as Jez pulled the Erinyes toward it.

"What in all the nine hells?" Levistus ran up to the bed and ripped the gag out of Cass's mouth.

Then Jez was back, working at the bindings at his wrists.

"I'll always have mastery over this body, my lord." Basileus held him gently, whispering in his ear, ignoring the tears of self-recrimination that ran down Cass's face. "I've taught you to respond to me, always to me."

His cheek burned.

"Cass?" Jez yelled, slapping his face again. "Lord save us all, he's lost it."

"I have to cut these," Levistus spoke, "what in all the hells the boy was thinking…"

"Don't." Cass tried to sit up, panic flooding his body. "Don't cut…"

"Shh, no. Cass." The angel's voice was heartbroken, he hugged Cass's head to his chest. "Just the ropes. No one is going to hurt you. You're safe. Shh."

"We have to get him cleaned up," Levistus said as he eased Cass's wrists free. "Cassius stay with us."

"Am I here?" Cass mumbled, "when?"

Jez hissed. "I don't like her."

“They were just having some bed sport,” Levistus chuffed. “Hells knows what this boy is accustomed to.”

“I felt his pain—no, his fucking *agony*—in my sleep. It woke me up.” Jez growled out. “That isn’t playful. This isn’t okay.”

“Jez’Piel.” Levistus sighed. “He was groomed to this. You don’t have to like it, but you do have to accept its part of who he is. Unfortunately.”

“*Don’t worry, Cassius,*” *Basileus whispered in his ear, then ran his tongue down his neck. “you’ll grow to love this…”*

He didn’t. It hurt. He didn’t like it at all.

“Cass.” Jez was shaking him again. “Pull yourself together.”

When had he gotten into the shower?

And why the fuck was Jez in here with him?

“Glasya sent soldiers. They’re in your hall, making themselves comfortable, with orders to report back to her.”

Cass snarled with outrage. Oh no she fucking didn’t.

“Let me go,” he said, trying to shake off the angel’s grip. “I have to deal with this.”

“Your wrist.” Jez grabbed his arm, stopping him mid-step. “Let me try to heal it? I might have that much left.”

Jez looked ridiculous. Water poured over his face, his pants soaked through. Cass stopped and took in a breath. Then smiled.

“You’re showering with your clothes on?” His smiled dropped as he looked down at himself. Deep cuts—six of which were very deep—ran the length of his torso. Blood was pooling at his feet, turning pink as it swirled to blend with the water.

Jez looked at him with pity. Cass straightened his shoulders, holding back the wince. He was not pitiable. He was strong. Forged in the Hells.

He wasn’t fucking breakable.

The heat from Jez’s hand warmed his wrist.

He was bandaged, dressed, and furious by the time he walked back out into his room. Levistus paced, looking harried and angry.

“Let’s go. She’ll not be invading my territories.” The coldness in his tone echoed through his entire body.

He walked into the hall, flanked by Jez on his left, Levistus on his right, heading straight for his throne.

The pigs she’d sent were all higher demons, already making sport of his servants. No, this would not be tolerated.

“Who speaks for you?” Cass called out over the din.

The soldiers gathered in formation, spread out in a V with their leader right at the bottom of Cass’s dais.

“I’m the General. I report directly to the Archduchess who gives us leave to post here.”

“Does she.” Cass didn’t sit. His power seethed with cold rage.

“Seems she doesn’t feel the so-called-king is worthy of his throne.” The General sneered.

Cass’s power blasted out, he felt the heavy wings flare out of his back, he noted Jez and Levistus shifting to make room.

“Does she then.” Cass’s power burned with a raw icy edge, swelling from somewhere deep inside, anchored as he’d never felt before.

“We’re here to monitor how things are run. So far, we’re unimpressed.” The general gave an ironic bow of his head.

And Cass snapped.

His vision blurred with the force of his rage, his body shuddering.

As one, he reached into them, seeking out their souls, his power a tumultuous beast of its own. His power sussed out their very essence, distilling each into mindless lust, they groaned in agonized bliss, crumpling into heaps, starting with the back, like a wave. Their hands tore at their clothing, reaching and grasping for the feel of flesh, for relief.

Relief he would never let them achieve. His inherent power, his control of Lust would ensure they remained in a suspended state of hunger, craving more, willing to seek release wherever and however they could.

He wouldn’t take their lives, just leave them wishing he would.

“Is there a cell large enough to hold them all?” Cass turned to his simpering majordomo.

“You mean to house them together when they’re like this?” Baal side-eyed the writhing mass of bodies.

“I do.” Cass looked on. His sister would do well with a reminder of what he was capable of, even without the power of the Hells to call upon.

“They’ll fuck each other to death.” Baal paled, flinching back.

“Oh, they won’t die,” Cass said, turning on his heel and storming back to his rooms.

55

WHAT'S A LITTLE PROPHECY AMONG FRIENDS

SOMETHING WITHIN THE GOD REALMS HAD GONE AMISS, AS WAS ALWAYS the case when the Gods and Goddesses decided to meddle with The Fates' decree. She wandered the ether, incorporeal, spying and listening, working to lay the pieces of a puzzle into a picture she could make sense of.

She could almost hear fate and destiny clash, and judging by the chaotic energy within the ether, whatever mayhem the gods had been up to would carry heavy consequence in its wake. The ether was thick with discord, confusion and messy lines.

Whatever had been done had been accomplished out of the dictates of fate, no longer was the future set in stone, and none were pleased by this turn.

Amara listened to the tumult of disembodied voices while cloaked in the veil which separated life from death, her consciousness floating aimlessly between the temporary and the eternal.

She caught murmurs of prophecy, a shift in power so vast it would serve to enslave man, immortal and gods alike.

Discomfort anchored her to the physical, forcing her to abandon her explorations and break the connection with the ether when her body's protests grew too persistent to ignore any longer.

Her legs cramped from kneeling, the muscles of her calves spasming. Her neck and back were stiff and aching, and her head throbbed as if possessing a pulse. "The Gods are fearful..."

“If it’s the ancient prophecy they speak of Sarratum-sa, then perhaps we should all be fearful.”

Oberith stepped closer, his hands coming up to offer her a towel. The out of place gesture giving her pause. “Perhaps, but I’d much rather be prepared than afraid.”

Tentatively, she reached for the cloth, growing aware of wet silk limiting her movements, the soaked fabric of her dark robes clinging heavily to her skin. Confusion deepened when she found her hands stained a deep crimson color. Her athame rested on her lap radiating with newly consumed energy, its sharp blade bathed in drops of ruby. *Not my blood.*

The essence of death lingered, further pulling her back into consciousness.

“What did I do?”

Oberith’s arm came around her for support when her legs refused to hold her weight, and she had to force down a shiver of revulsion. Not because of her dominus, she simply couldn’t bear to be touched when weakened.

“Accept my assistance until you gather your bearings, Sarratum-sa. Remember that I would never place harm upon you.” Oberith kept his voice low and even, coaxing her into submission.

Something shiny caught her attention as her unfocused gaze roamed over the onyx floors of the temple, snagging on the glistening pools of stagnant blood. It happened again…

“Am I finally going mad, Berith?” She had no recollection of anyone attacking her, didn’t recall killing any of them...

Dominus Oberith shifted to block her view of the hall, placing himself between her and the carnage.

“Most died instantly, those who tried to attack you, however...” his gaze flicked to the athame she held loosely within her grasp, “did not.”

Peeking over his shoulder she couldn’t help but flinch at large the number of bodies littering the temple hall. Warlocks, nobles, emissaries, she had spared none this time. Sightless eyes stared back at her, bodies laid over one another, some laying on their backs in pools of coagulating blood, some had died trying to crawl away, their hands forever reaching...

“Tell me what occurred,” she said, her voice small.

It had been the death of so many of her people that had admitted her into the gods-realm, the reason she had been adrift there for so long. How

long had it been?

The Temple doors swung open, Domina Ravanna and Dominus Malachi entering, followed by the rest of the Order.

“Welcome back Sarratum-sa, you were out for quite a while this time. We were beginning to fear we would have need of tranquilizer darts.”

Her skin was beginning to itch where the silk dried to the sticky blood.

“Ravanna!” Elmira’s husky voice hissed up from behind the Domina.

“What? It’s true.”

Malachi stepped before her, “I would’ve personally voted against it Sarratum-sa, I quite enjoyed the spectacle. And I must say I was rather pleased to see this lousy lot be sent to Hades.”

Mara’s brows shot up when Oberith turned to look over his shoulder, giving Dominus Malachi a boastful grin. “I told you she’d get them all, you owe me one of your pretty acolytes.”

“You’ll make do with my ugliest one instead, you already stole away my favorite last week,” Malachi shot back.

“Ah yes, such a charming creature. I shall be sure to give her your regards.”

The drumming in her head grew more persistent at their foolery, “If you two are quite done! I’m lost here, who is ‘them’ and how did so many people come to be inside the temple? Why are all of you even here?”

All laughter stopped as nine sets of eyes stared at her with varying degrees of concern, but it was Domina Elmira who answered, her husky voice gentle, “Sarratum-sa, do you not recall attending the hearing?”

“Not entirely.” She blinked, trying to think back, finding only lapses of time, scenes that she couldn’t make rhyme nor reason of. “I recall… nothing.”

“The nobles of the realm requested an audience with you, do you recall that?” At her nod Elmira proceeded, appearing slightly relieved at her acknowledgement. “We all assembled here at your command, tasked to listen and advise during the proceeding. Tempers ran high when the nobles made a demand to have the ritual of blood cleansing reinstated as their right to practice.”

Malachi’s voice had been a near growl when he spoke next. “They fear losing their power and control over the commoners when they cannot punish them with violence and death.”

“Request denied.” Ravanna’s cheerful tone chimed in, her arms wide in gesture as she theatrically bowed towards the pile lifeless bodies littering the floor. “Now will someone please have this mess cleaned up, they’re starting to stink.”

“Come along Sarratum-sa, the others will see things put back to right. While Bel-Agate gets you cleaned up, you can tell me what it is the Gods are doing that kept your interest for so long.” Elmira said, keeping Mara grounded and focused.

At Domina Elmira’s gentle tug Mara moved to follow, nearly losing her footing as she tripped, her nose scrunching when catching sight of the culprit.

“Why is there a severed hand on my floor?”

The question hung in the air until Dominus Oberith let out a rather suspicious sounding cough. “As I recall, you cut it off and used it to slap its owner in the face.”

“And why would I do that?” She exclaimed.

“Because he tried to hit you with it.”

Elmira’s tugging grew more persistent as she threw a monument worthy stink eye in Oberith’s direction.

“Some of the nobles attacked when their appeal was rejected. You flew into a fit of rage, striking down all who were in attendance. Before we could pull you back, the amount of blood spilled sent you into a trance. You remained trapped in that state nearly eight hours. We all took turns watching over you, ensuring your body wouldn’t be harmed while your mind was elsewhere.”

“Eight hours? Wait, will there not be a backlash for my actions? Most of those who died by my hand… or their own hand as the case may be, they belonged to powerful families.”

“And all those families will now find themselves charged with treason for the attempt made upon your life, we shall see to it Sarratum-sa. Now come along, I don’t wish to cause offense, but you’re in dire need of a bath,” Elmira chided.

Domina Elmira hadn’t exaggerated, Mara realized, for only when Agate emptied a third bucket of warm water over her head did it finally run clear rather than red with blood.

“Highness, you’re not going mad, you’re merely losing grip over your powers. It’s not unusual for your magick to grow volatile in response to

mental distress, yours is more acute than most. And it's not at all surprising you are experiencing distress considering the fact you're hardly sleeping anymore," Elmira finally spoke to address Mara's main concern.

The indirect reprimand had Mara glowering in Agate's direction. Her attendant had been speaking out of turn? Elmira had no business knowing about Mara's private matters.

"Don't be looking at me that way Sarratum-sa, those dark circles under your eyes tell more tales than I ever will," Agate said with a saucy smirk.

Bested by both Domina and attendant, Mara sank lower into the tub, grumbling on her way down.

"Upon my request Bel-Agate has asked En-Rasputin for a sleep aid, and a poultice to help hide the signs of your fatigue. But you must try to rest, highness."

Closing her eyes, she tiredly leaned her head back against the rim of the oversized tub, greedily soaking up the soothing heat of the water, basking in the calming scent of herbs.

"How do you expect me to sleep when they won't be silent? The Gods grow more tumultuous with each passing day, yet they speak over each other, so I cannot understand. All I can make out is the occasional mention of the prophecy amidst the chaos. But it's clear that the Gods have done something, Elmira, and it's gone terribly wrong. I just haven't been able to decipher what it is."

She could hear the soft tinkling sound of her Domina's many silver bracelets and waist belts from behind the curtain as Elmira moved to make herself more comfortable upon the divan. The imposing fireplace in the room had been lit, keeping the air warm within the chambers, while bathing it in soft light, which at times appeared to dance with the shadows.

"You fear their actions involve the Demon King?" Elmira mused.

"They speak about the prophecy, therefore you and I both know it must involve Cassius," Mara's voice sounded haunted, even to her own ears. "Something's happening, something bad. And he is there alone, surrounded by snakes he trusts too much… *because he remembers too little*."

He could not be allowed to remember more either, or he would be lost entirely.

Moments passed between them before Elmira finally spoke again. "Forgive my directness Sarratum-sa, but you should not return to the

Hells, the risk for you both is too great. Should he somehow come to remember who he is, he'll be lost, and if he remembers who you are, Namtar will have gained claim on his life."

Water splashed onto the floor as she shot up from her bath. "Agate leave us NOW!"

To her astonishment, her attendant hesitated. "Sarratum-sa, I'll leave if you wish it. But if it's to keep the Demon King's identity secret... I know," Agate spoke meekly, cringing back and bracing herself for the inevitable.

Her magick snapped to attention, darkness coiling around her as an avalanche of emotions threatened to take hold.

"What is it you *think* you know Agate…?" Her words hissed from between clenched teeth, the woman's life pending upon the next few words she spoke.

"Please Sarratum-sa, I didn't intend to pry. I know of his identity for the same reason that I know why you refuse to sleep. Ever since you returned from the Ghata'n kingdom your nightmares have been increasing. I know this to be true because when they come, you always cry out for him, and I've heard the name you call him by."

Even the warm water was unable to combat the icy chill of dread which spread through her at Agate's confession.

"Who else knows?"

"No one except for General Dravite. I had no choice highness, but to confide in her. Once I realized the danger should someone overhear, I panicked. I didn't trust anyone with this information not the guards, or even the Order. When I instructed my sis... General Dravite to withdraw her warriors from your chambers during the night hours, she refused.

"It was only after I confessed what I learned that she agreed, since then, she and I have been standing guard over your chambers during those rare moments you sleep. Please believe me when I say that both Dravite and I would lay down our lives for you Sarratum-sa, your secret remains safe."

"Agate go fetch your sister and bring her here. I'll assist her highness until then." Elmira wasted no time dismissing her attendant, placing herself between Amara and the fleeing form.

"She won't betray your trust Sarratum-sa, don't harm her. You'll grow to regret it if you do. Loyalty is a trait not found in many, don't squander it by giving in to fear."

She took a few precious moments to regain control over her temper. Had it not been for Elmira's intervention, she would've killed Agate. Her need to keep her secret safe, to protect Cassius, overriding all other logic and emotions.

"Thank you, Domina." She stepped out of the tub, reaching for her robes, quickly covering herself before turning to face Elmira once more.

"I received word that Asmodeus and King Cassius have entered a signed agreement, one that grants his sister unchallenged access into the Nessus."

Elmira's expression of incredulity well matched her own, concern carving deep lines upon her Domina's exotic features.

"Dark gods why would the king ever agree to such a thing?"

"I doubt he was left much choice in the matter. Now you understand why I cannot abandon him Elmira. The snakes are coiling around him, ready to strike. Basileus and Glasya are plotting against him, and Levistus possesses ulterior motives which have nothing to do with Cassius's well being.

"His herald is a soldier, but inexperienced with Hell politics and ignorant of the dangers that lay in wait. The demon is struggling to keep his throne and those truly loyal to him are but a few. So what am I to do?"

"If he has none that'll stand by his side, send him those who will stand by yours, Sarratum-sa."

A knock on the door had them both turning, her gaze falling upon a flustered Agate, Dravite the General of her battalions standing beside her. Dravite and her warriors had been among the first to support Amara's claim to the throne, they'd been her sword when fighting to reclaim the realm, and the first to swear fealty to the newly crowned Sarratum.

"Step forward."

Dravite obeyed without hesitation, coming to a halt directly before Amara and dropped to a knee, her head bowed low.

"I was the one who insisted Agate reveal her reasons, Sarratum-sa. If you are to punish someone, please spare my sister and claim my head for the breach of trust this has caused."

Send those who are loyal to you...

"Rise Dravite, neither you nor your sister will perish today. In fact, I owe you both a debt of gratitude."

She sensed relief flood through the general, but to her credit, she did nothing to show the emotion.

“Truth be told, I am in a bind and require help. I find that I am in need of someone who I consider to be loyal beyond the shadow of doubt. Someone who won’t easily fall prey to the corruption of the Hells and is strong enough to not be tempted by the games played within its highest ranks. So, it appears, General Dravite, that I have need of you,” she said, her insides churning with emotion.

Her mind kept wandering back to Cassius, no matter how much she tried to stop. His pride had been injured, and he would likely be furious with her, she knew this.

Even now she could feel his sigil burn angrily upon the palm of her hand, a constant reminder to her of his displeasure with her. He hated her for the choice she made.

If it means you’ll live demon, then I can bear being hated, even by you.

With a deep breath, she forced the words from her lips. “Dravite, you’ll enter the Nessus and join Cassius’s harem. There you shall serve as my eyes and ears and you’ll notify me of any threat against the Demon King. But most importantly you will protect and guard him as you would me, keep him safe at all costs, am I understood?”

The room had gone silent, even Elmira left too stunned to speak.

“His harem! Are you sure about this Highness?” Dravite finally asked.

“The Demon King has his pride. Should I send you under any other guise, he’ll either reject or kill you. Neither outcome is acceptable.”

“I won’t fail you, highness.”

Failing to suppress the sorrow that threatened to pull her under Mara reached for her general, clearly surprising her when she pulled her close, then pressed a small wooden box into her hands.

“Give this to Cassius from me.”

Her general’s lips parted on a gasp when she stared into Mara’s gaze. The gasp turned into a needy moan when Mara closed her lips over Dravite’s. In her kiss she placed everything she felt — longing, sorrow, grief, but also devotion, desire and deeply buried, where only few would find it, there was love. She burned every emotion into her general’s soul, ensuring that if Cassius bothered to look, he would find it there, her secret message to him.

“You’re my only link to him now Dravite, look after him for me.”

56

IN MY DEFENSE, I THOUGHT IT WAS REAL

CASS SET DOWN HIS BOOK AND BRACED HIMSELF FOR WHATEVER THE TWO of them had ganged up to lecture him about. Neither had mentioned the incident in the hall, everyone was tip-toeing around his uncertain temper.

Fighting your own mind was exhausting. Worse when no one would give him straight answers. That pointed glare went to Levistus.

“We’ve had word from Asurim,” Levistus said, stiffening as though he were expecting Cass to lash out.

He barely managed to restrain himself.

Mara talked to them and not him? Had she fully forsaken him?

He’d pushed too far. He’d always known that it wasn’t going to be like that between them. Had always respected those boundaries. Well, always known... that he could remember. That aching void in his chest said that at some point, it might’ve been otherwise.

And she didn’t want him to remember either.

“Cass, this is Dravite,” Jez said, smiling back at the warlock the two of them had been blocking from view. Jez’s hand lingered a little longer than it needed to on her shoulder as he brought her forward.

Of course Cass noticed. Whether he cared was a different story.

Fury was buzzing through his mind, eating up all his other, more rational-type thoughts. The warlock had Mara’s scent lingering all over her, she oozed pride and dark magicks. And fear. He could scent that too.

Cass stood and walked over, both Jez and Levistus closing in around the girl protectively.

Like he'd hurt her?

He cupped the back of her neck and pulled her closer to him, breathing in deeply of her scent, rubbing his thumb up and down the column of her throat.

Maybe he would.

Did she think to send him a consolation offering? To placate him with a replacement?

His hand tightened, and she gasped. Jez jumped forward and Levistus cleared his throat.

"Did she send you to check on me or to warm my bed?" Cass asked softly.

His blood pumped hotly, fueled by the forge of rage that burned from that void in his chest. She opened her mouth to answer and his hand tightened again. She squeaked, and Jez grabbed his shoulder.

He dropped his hand from her throat, shaking off Jez's grip to lean in closer to her.

"Will you report back every filthy thing I do to your body?" he whispered against her neck, the backs of his fingers trailing down to her collarbone.

Her breath caught on a quiet whimper, her nipples beading visibly through her filmy robes. His fingers kept going, his knuckles brushing over one of the peaks, and with a sigh, her body swayed into his.

"That would leave you with nothing to tell her," he said, pulling back. "I don't want this. I won't accept you as her substitute."

He stepped back, for the first time noticing the case she carried in her hands.

"Cassius, Amara is your ally. Let's try to keep her appeased, yes?" Levistus said, still alert and expecting… what? For Cass to snap?

"Why did the Priestess send you… Dravite, was it?" Cass watched the warlock expectantly. She gave a shy nod back. "Is she well?" His heart pounded at the thought of something happening to her.

Like fuck they didn't mean more to each other than allies. He didn't care *what* he remembered, his soul knew.

"She sent this for you." Dravite held up the case. "As well as myself. I'm to be your concubine."

His laughter trailed off when he realized she was serious.

He gave Levistus a bemused expression. "My ally or my pimp?"

He took the case from Dravite, holding it with one hand and opening it with the other.

Ah. All his requisite potions. His Priestess had always made sure he'd had his contraceptive potion. Before, he'd always assumed she understood his aversion to procreation—now, he wondered if there was more behind it. Had he made her promises he didn't recall?

He swallowed hard, his jaw clicking as he gnashed his teeth. Not knowing his whole mind—his life being one glossed over lie—it was killing him inside.

"Leave us," he spoke to both Levistus and Jez.

Neither made a motion to move.

"I won't hurt her," Cass said, trying to calm himself. He wouldn't. She was his only tie to the Priestess right now.

He fucking needed something.

Eventually, he might get over her very public rejection. He might be able to swallow his pride and face her again. But not yet.

When he remembered fully.

Then he would confront her with everything she'd kept hidden from him. Every awful truth that was slowly bleeding back in.

They finally left, and Cass slumped back down on his sofa, cradling the case to his chest. Dravite made no move from the spot she was frozen to. Didn't attempt to speak. Cass didn't break the silence.

He needed her. His priestess. She'd been such an easy fixture in his life, every part of it he could remember. The discomfort of not being able to go to her was like a raw, exposed wound he couldn't help but prod at.

But he could forget for a while.

He opened the case, plucking out the contraceptive potion, tossing it back with one swallow. Dravite gasped and finally took a step toward him. She was going to take this away?

He felt the burn of the potion, welcomed it. Needed to wash it away. He uncorked a fancy vial of unknown poison, giving momentary thought to what the Priestess planned to poison him with this time. Perhaps she thought to finish him off before he could organize the mess of his mind.

The warlock whimpered as he downed it. He made eye contact with her the entire time, wondering if she'd give away what the repercussions would be.

His body tightened as his blood turned to acid, eating away at his nerve endings. Dravite took the case from his shaking hands right before his skin started to feel like it was splitting open. A convulsion wracked through him, dampness flowing over his lip.

He felt gentle hands dabbing at his face as his body rode out the waves of agony, he grasped on to her and pulled her close.

"Mara…" he whispered. All he could focus on was the scent of her. The warlock smelled like her.

His mind was full of nothing but the whining buzz of pain, his body responding, as it always did. Her hands swept down his chest. His hands tore at her clothes. Both of her hands wrapped around his cock, his hand cupped her wet heat, fingers probing, motions unsteady.

Her tongue dipped into his mouth and he jerked back, not sure of how much of the poison lingered. How much it would take to hurt her.

He never wanted her to hurt.

Another wave of agony blazed through him, and he roared with it, the pain so intense his vision went completely black.

She straddled his waist and guided him into her slick sheath. He was lost to it. Mindless. No choice but to give into this. He sat up, pulled her chest to his and plunged in harder. Deeper. He was losing his fucking mind.

She held his head, her mouth devouring his, her beaded nipples scraping up and down his chest. Her wetness pooled over the tops of his thighs, his bones were splintering through nerves…

She rode him lazily, taking everything that he had. Bleeding him dry of it.

"*Why can't I make you promises*?" *He twined his fingers through hers, his arm pushed through the bars as far as he could reach. It was never enough. The scent of her haunted his dreams. Her eyes haunted his waking hours.*

"*Someday, I'm going to be King. They can't stop me. You're mine." He pulled her hand through the bars, pressing soft kisses to her palm, then her wrist. Wishing it were her mouth. "And I'm yours. Only ever yours."*

He knew she liked to watch him touching himself. There was nothing better to him than watching her. Tasting her. When she came all over her fingers and let him taste her orgasm.

He stroked faster. Harder. Held her hand tighter.

“I don’t think they’ll ever let me out of here,” she whispered, those cyan eyes sad. Always so sad.

“I want to kiss you,” he said, his orgasm building.

That’s all he wanted. Just to feel her lips on his. Her body pressed against his.

“It was bad this time?” Her voice was breathy too. “Your pain…”

Her breathing was just as hard as his, her movements just as frantic. She whimpered, her teeth biting through her lip to keep her scream at bay, her body arching with her release.

Her fingers pressed into his waiting mouth and he sucked off the remains of her orgasm and gave into his own.

“He took it before I could stop him. My priestess meant no ill intent.” The warlock was there, her naked body glistening in the firelight. Well fucked and well used glow about her. Jez looked furious, Levistus facing the fire, averting his eyes from the warlock’s nudity.

His body burned, boneless and weak, the firelight burned down to embers, barely lighting the room. He pulled his pants back up carefully, noting the scratch marks down his abdomen.

“I know, sweetheart,” Levistus said to her, his hand was on Jez’s chest. “I think he and the priestess have done this a time or two.” He said the last to Jez with a warning glare.

“So we just let her poison him?” Jez growled. “What the fuck is wrong with you people?”

“I need it,” Cass said, his voice hoarse. “To prevent me from having children.”

All three of them turned to him.

“Are you mad?” Levistus roared. “You have to secure your succession. Never mind the chances of any of us being able to procreate is so low—all the hells Cassius. What are you thinking?”

“Children are a blessing,” Jez added with a frown.

“No.” Cass glared at them both, easing himself up and pulling a blanket over his lap.

“No?” Levistus’ face was red, his teeth clenched. “That’s it? Just no?”

“I won’t ever be a *father*.” Cass spat out the word and waved him off and dropped his pounding head into his hand. “It’s not your concern.”

“It’ll become my concern if something happens to you and the rule of the Hells falls to Glasya,” Levistus was still yelling, angrier than Cass had

ever seen him.

“It won’t. She’s not strong enough,” Cass said weakly, wishing they’d go away so he could bask in his newly discovered memory.

He wanted to crawl into it and live there.

The eyes… it had to be her. Lying little Priestess. Keeping all that from him.

He remembered her taste now. He remembered the color of her eyes after she climaxed. He remembered the sounds she made.

And… he was hard again.

“Leave her here and go,” Cass said nodding to Levistus then Jez.

Levistus stormed out of the room, Jez following with one last glance over his shoulder.

“And you,” Cass said, grabbing Dravite and pulling her back onto his lap. “I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to walk tomorrow.” He grabbed a handful of her hair and nipped at her neck. “Go to the bed.”

Might as well give her something fun to report back to Amara.

He let a bit of the malevolence he felt show in his smirk as he followed the warlock to his bed.

57

SPLENDID CUPPA TEA

"IF IT WEREN'T URGENT, I'D LEAVE YOU TO YOUR WALLOWING." LEVISTUS rifled through Cass's dresser, tossing clothes his way. "Barbatos is a powerful seer, if he has wisdom to impart, your ear needs to be available."

"Alright, I'm up. Fuck." He slid the warlock's leg off his waist and climbed out from under Jez's wing, startling the angel awake.

Jez sat up, swiping his hands down his face, his eyes raking over the naked female on Cass's other side.

"Where are you off to?" His herald had already pushed blankets aside and stood from the bed.

They had both been stiflingly overprotective of him, Levistus keeping him from wandering back to Mara's bed, Jez keeping Leira out of his. He'd toss all of his crowns in the Hell-flames for just one day of solitude.

He picked up his pile of clothes and made his way to the bathroom, washing quick and barely even bothering to dry before tugging on his clothes. He wasn't sure what Levistus's definition of 'urgent' was, but curiosity had taken hold and his own mind started to obsess.

He'd never met the Archdeacon of the First Realm, though his concubines were regularly supplied by him, through Bas. He hadn't known he was an oracle and had no idea if he was even a demon. Speculation on that had been circulating for all of Cass's life, at least.

"Because he knew Avrogale personally." Levistus was saying to Jez as Cass walked out of the bathroom. "I'd like to hear what he knows."

He stopped walking, his hands stopped rubbing the towel over his hair, a whining noise droning in his ears as his mind grasped for meaning, a memory floating up and dragging him in.

"Such a fine young man you are." Her voice was like warm honey, her hands smoothing the hair from his face. "You're strong, you'll be fine without me now."

"Avrogale, enough. The portal won't remain open much longer." His father's voice was cold, his hands resting on Cass's shoulders, making him stiffen. "You made your deal, got what you wanted." The hands squeezed harder when his mother dropped to her knees in front of him.

Her thumbs swiped at his cheeks under his eyes, picking up the tears that had fallen, then one of them came to rest over his rapidly beating heart.

"I'll always be here, my son. I'm not going to leave you alone."

"Enough," his father barked out. "You've coddled and spoiled my son. *He's demon born, carries* my *power. You're making him soft."*

His mother jumped to her feet. "The gods will smite you down for this, Asmodeus."

His father laughed, a chilling sound that made Cass's insides flip.

"I have a contract, signed with your own blood. Your firstborn, for the power you needed to survive."

"You double-crossed me!" She shouted. "Nowhere in that contract does it state that my firstborn would be conceived by you."

His father stepped around him, grabbing the back of his mother's head, and kissed her. Cass's young mind couldn't comprehend—

"Ah, my sweet goddess. But could you resist?"

Jez's hands cupped his cheeks, the angel's sea storm eyes looking into his.

"You're okay?" Jez whispered.

Cass managed to nod.

"I'm coming with you guys," Jez said over his shoulder. "The Nessus will be fine enough without us for the time this meeting will take."

"Now, then," Levistus said with a sigh, nudging Cass's boots towards him.

Cass pulled open a hell-gate once they were all gathered, the action no more than a thought. It came so easily to him, he couldn't remember how he couldn't make them.

They walked out right into Barbatos's main hall, knowing the Archduke was expecting them. Incense hung heavily in the air, silks draped throughout the hall, covering old stone and making the place feel almost welcoming.

The underlying scent in the air of sweet rot brought another memory to the surface, his mind flashing back to holding his father's hand as they picked their way through the thriving mass that made up the ground of the Avernus.

"*Papa why is everything alive here?" He stepped around what at first glance appeared to be a stump.*

"*Because, my boy, this is the closest the Hells will ever get to the Material Plane." Asmodeus's step was light, his entire demeanor anticipatory.*

Yes, he remembered meeting Barbatos. He remembered his father's excitement. He remembered the females. Even as a young boy he'd been fascinated.

It was like a lock had been opened on the vault of his memories, normal activities triggering them, as they should. He wondered how much of his life had been locked away?

"You're late," a deep voice carried from the back of the hall, followed by a robed figure, "my King."

Barbatos stopped in front of him with a sweeping bow that put Mephistopheles's showmanship to shame. His face was covered by a deep cowl, but Cass felt the weight of the other demon's gaze. His body was large, attested to by the broad shoulders his cloak was stretched across, his height nearing Cass's own.

He didn't feel like a demon, Cass couldn't place his heritage.

"Lord Barbatos," Cass replied with an incline of his own head. "Well met."

A chuffing noise came from under the hood. "Of course you don't remember that we've met. Many times."

Barbatos stated it as fact, appearing to take no insult that Cass's memory was faulty. Because he knew?

"I have tea and words for you today. Come, come." Barbatos spoke rapidly, grabbing Cass's shoulder and steering him towards the hall.

Cass threw a helpless look over his shoulder to Levistus and Jez who were standing there looking bemused at their surroundings, but quickly

moved to follow.

They walked through curtains upon curtains of fabric, the only stone visible was that beneath their feet. He was rushed into a back room, an intimate sitting room like his own bedrooms. Women were everywhere, draped over the furniture as much as all the silks. Some were kissing each other, most were nude. All had wings.

Barbatos's Erinyes—the Furies.

He heard Jez's sharp intake of breath and Levistus's chuckle but didn't take the time to gawk as Barbatos led them to a back table where a fancy tea service had been set up. Cass took a seat, looking back over the room, snickering softly at the sight of a shapely red-haired Furie draped all over Jez.

Levistus neatly avoided all their touches and pulled up a chair off to the side of the table that Cass sat at with Barbatos.

Barbatos poured a cup of tea and slid it over in front of Cass. "Drink while it's still warm. I'm ahead of you."

Cass slid a look to Levistus who just shrugged and picked up his cup of lukewarm tea. Why all the Hells did he not just call for a fresh pot? He took a tentative sip and couldn't hold back his grimace at the bitter taste, but Barbatos wasn't paying him any attention.

"Aren't you going to offer my Advisor and Herald refreshment as well?" No one could accuse him of diplomacy. Levistus choked beside him and Barbatos laughed.

"But of course, if your highness wishes." Barbatos made a signal in the air and a half naked Furie appeared with more cups, filling them and offering one to Levistus, carrying the second over to Jez — who was now seated on a chaise with a woman on his lap.

Jez accepted the cup and set the female to the side, wandering over to the table, making himself comfortable on the arm of a sofa across from them, downing all the contents in one toss of his head.

Cass followed suit. Easiest way to get rid of the disgusting liquid and not cause offense.

"I'd offer you a female, but I see that time has passed," Barbatos spoke as though they'd been carrying on a conversation. "Now, will you tell me what you remember? Hurry before I forget."

Cass opened his mouth. Then closed it again. How did one make sense of nonsense?

“He means since the Blood Lord broke through your mind.” Levistus leaned forward to speak quietly to him.

“No,” Barbatos held his hand to Levistus, “I speak of the time since being ran through by the Sword of Justice. His grandmother’s own weapon.”

His mind reeled. He wasn’t even aware he *had* a grandmother. His father was celestial, born of the fabric of the universe. His mother… was no more than a myth to him.

“What does the sword have to do with my memory?” Cass hedged, clearing his throat, pondering how much to tell this stranger. Who knew more about him than he knew himself.

Barbatos just nodded to himself, his barely visible face turned to face the wall. “They all want to know what you know before they tell you what they know.”

Cass stifled a growl, taking in a calming breath, reminding himself to practice his patience.

“Mostly I remember a girl.” Cass looked away, not wanting to meet any of their eyes. “Other stuff that I can’t make sense of.”

“Your father.” Jez blurted out and Cass shot him a scathing glare.

“Ah yes,” Barbatos mumbled. “It wasn’t supposed to be that way. How many times can an apocalypse be averted?”

“Beg pardon?” Cass leaned forward, definitely interested now.

“We were supposed to meet before this day. I sent them to watch you,” Barbatos mumbled, his voice sounding echoey. Cass shook his head, trying to concentrate. “The Sword is back in play, heralding the next shift, the gods are playing pick-up-sticks and the Fates are blind.”

Levistus was mumbling something, Cass couldn’t hear it over all the noise in the room. Giggles and the sound of flesh rubbing against flesh, wet sucking noises and everything all at once.

Jez jumped to his feet and dragged his hands through his hair, slowly looking around the room with his brows drawn. Levistus was shaking his shoulder, Cass was too busy concentrating on Barbatos’ words.

He was whispering in Greek, the words drilling into Cass’s brain.

“And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.” Barbatos mumbled.

Cass moved in closer. Was he quoting scripture? Revelations and apocalypse shit? Cassius knew the mortal scripture by heart, it had been part of his studies.

“I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death.” Barbatos shook his head slowly, breaking free of his trance. “I pity those who do not stand on your side through this shift, my King.”

Take peace from the earth—a sword—what did the Sword of Justice have to do with anything? And why bring up Death? Because Death had the sword… Cass nodded to himself, pleased he’d figured it out.

He jumped when Barbatos placed skeletal hands over his. The hand turned back to flesh and Cass’s eyes jumped up to meet Barbatos’s beneath his hood. They glowed an iridescent green, otherworldly, and not in the demonic way.

“I didn’t send her to you,” Barbatos said, his voice hushed, “and I only meant the drink for you. Best head back now, while you’re all still in your right minds.” His hand settled on Cass’s chest, directly where his mother had in his memory.

“Know you are not abandoned.”

Cass shook his head. Then shook it again. The world was starting to feel fuzzy. Not poison, but not right.

Barbatos was ushering the Erinyes out of the room, leaving him alone with Jez and Levistus. Both stood, rubbing their faces. Then their hair. Cass found himself doing it too, the need to stretch an obsessive feeling, his skin feeling tight.

“We have to get back,” Levistus said, his pupils blown wide. “Now.”

“He poisoned us?” Jez said, rubbing his hand up and down his chest.

“Not poison,” Cass said, movement on the walls capturing his attention.

Even the walls were alive. Squirming.

Wait. They shouldn’t be. They hadn’t been…

“Drugs,” Levistus said, grabbing both Cass and Jez by the backs of their necks. “He uses drugs to help him see.”

Cass’s every movement blurred blue traceries behind it, Jez seeming to have the same problem, judging by how he was watching his hand moving.

Cass waved his hand, opening a hell-gate, snickering as the blue flames swirled in with the red.

“Keep it together Cassius. Five more minutes,” Levistus said, pulling them all through.

58

AND IF YOU GO CHASING RABBITS

THEY WALKED BACK THROUGH THE HELL-GATE, SHOULDER TO SHOULDER, propping each other as they entered Cass's rooms. The fire was out, and a small detour to his door to shout for an attendant had his guards scrambling to set his rooms to rights.

"Poke fun all you want." Jez poked him in the chest. "I've seen your taste in women."

Cass ushered the attendants out of the room once the fire was lit and bed was turned down, speaking over his shoulder to Jez, who stood between the settee and the mantle.

"But, a Furie?" Cass snickered, laughter bubbling out. He couldn't seem to stop it. Everything was fucking hilarious. "The first female I've seen you attracted to and she's the complete opposite of what you are."

"That's not true," Jez said, cutting him off, his eyes focused over Cass's shoulder. "Your priestess is a delectable piece."

"No—" Levistus shouted, jumping for them.

Too late. Cass lunged, tackling Jez to the floor. He had the advantage of surprise, but Jez outweighed him in sheer bulk, his arms and shoulders straining as he shifted Cass's entire weight and pinned him beneath him.

"Fucking pansy," Jez snarled.

"Kiss your mother with that mouth?" Cass snarled back, shifting his legs so that Jez was fully laid out over top of him, legs tangled, Jez's forearms pressing Cass's shoulders to the ground.

"Oh! my lord." A female gasped. Dravite, he guessed.

“At least I remember my mother,” Jez hissed at him, sinking down lower, pressing his chest to Cass’s.

“Do you?” Cass said, his squirming stopping.

“Oh.” Jez pulled himself up on his elbows. “I don’t think so.”

Cass snorted then burst into full bellied guffaws, Jez joining in, both laughing so hard they couldn’t breathe.

“Get your shit together.” Levistus was yanking on Cass’s arm, trying to pull him out from under Jez.

Cass only laughed harder, grasping Levistus and pulling him down too. Jez let out a peal of laughter, kicking off another bout for Cass.

Levistus lay on his back looking at the ceiling, a smile twitching on his own mouth.

“Are you three addled?” Dravite stood over them, poking at Levistus with her toe.

All three of them burst into laughter with that.

“Have you been drinking?” The warlock kneeled to pull Levistus back up into a sitting position.

Cass sighed, Jez snickered again.

“Don’t,” Cass groaned, “my ribs hurt.”

“Because you let your woman slice you up?” Jez looked at him from the side of his eyes.

With another snarl, Cass rolled on top of him, pinning him to the floor this time, holding his hands above his head.

“I’m sure you have a few kinks in that closet, holy boy,” Cass said, leaning so close their lips nearly touched.

“Do it,” Jez’s expression turned mulish.

He tore his hand from Cass’s, palmed the back of Cass’s head and pulled his mouth to his. Their lips met with a spark of power, Jez’s mouth hot and hard on his. Tension left his body, all of his focus diverted to this need — his one hand gripping Jez’s neck, the other tangling in his hair to hold him steady, deepening the kiss.

Cass lost himself to it, the heat of his mouth, his slow sensual sucks — the power flowing between them like a pulse.

“Oh no.” Levistus pulled Cass up. “You two are not doing this in this condition.”

“But I want to,” Cass said, pulling his arm free.

“Please, let me.” Dravite sat between them, leaning down and turning Cass’s face to hers.

“My turn,” Jez said, sitting up and cupping Dravite’s cheek, bringing her lips to his.

“All the hells. You boys play nice. I’m off to meditate this shit away,” Levistus said, brushing himself off and moving briskly out the door.

Cass turned her lips back to his, probing her with his tongue, building up her desire. He felt Jez’s hand between them, cupping her breast, then the other. Cass moved his fingers lower, sweeping aside her robes to seek out her center.

She broke off their kiss and turned back to Jez, her hips rocking against Cass’s hand, so he kissed down her neck, then lower, his tongue circling her nipple as his fingers pushed inside of her. Jez’s mouth devoured hers, his hand holding her other breast, his thumb dragging back and forth across that peak.

Cass’s thumb circled her engorged clit, his fingers stroking her inside, she was making noises of pleasure that were lost in the angel’s mouth. Then Jez had Cass’s jaw in his hand again, his mouth back on his, deep and hot. He felt a soft hand circling his cock, and Jez’s groan told him they were probably both getting the same treatment.

“Wait.” Cass pulled back and stood up, running to his dresser and grabbing the case off the top.

“Don’t,” Jez shouted.

“Not…” Dravite’s words faltered away as Cass shot back the entire vial. “A good idea.” She finished with a mournful shake of her head.

He tore off his clothes, then stood watching as Jez stripped down and slowly removed the warlock’s robes, revealing pearly skin and a battle-honed body.

“Now,” Cass said, grabbing them each by an arm. “Dravite, you — up on your hands and knees. Jez, you’re going to take her from behind. While she sucks me off.”

His energy was a manic, palpable thing. It surged. He felt like he could fly.

Both of them stared at him with mouths agape.

“Come on!” Cass said, clapping his hands and smiling too brightly. He jumped onto the bed on his knees, bouncing delightedly, Jez following behind laughing, tackling Cass onto the mattress.

“I feel fantastic,” Jez said, pushing Cass’s hair back, before kissing him again.

So did Cass. His body burned…

“Wait,” Dravite said from off to the side of the bed. “I’m supposed to be in there somewhere.” She pulled Jez off Cass, “I think you’re higher than a kite, Jez. Bloody lightweights.”

Cass reluctantly let go of Jez, his mind having latched on to the idea of sharing power with him like this and was now fixated.

He forgot that the minute her lips wrapped around his erection. About the same time as the burning through his body turned painful. But he had control of it this time. It wasn’t scattered about. It was centered on where his power gathered, forging it anew, clearing the path.

Making him lose his mind to it.

She was moaning around his cock, her breasts bouncing against his legs as Jez pounded into her. Cass’s bleary mind turned over, agony eating up all his neural transmissions, his body no longer his to control. He felt his orgasm, like he was observing and rating it. The entire process from one feeling to the next.

His mind went fuzzy, with nothing left to focus on it retreated into itself… or, somewhere.

His blood boiled, his skin splitting open, the cracks making way to blue flame. Ashes floated off his burning body, carried away on the breeze. He heard the rhythmic pounding of hoofbeats before he felt the horse beneath him.

Ka-thunk thud —sawing breaths— repeat.

The horse beneath him had a coat of gleaming black, together they rode through barren fields, no sign of life anywhere. Dying crops lay wasting in the heat of the sun, skeletal remains scattered about, the sound of hoofbeats following him close, but not another soul could be seen.

Then he was standing above it all, his hands weighted down with scales that were teetering precariously.

“You doubt that he’ll speak for us? He’s my son!” A woman’s clipped tones echoed across the wasteland.

“You say that with such certainty, when the boy has no memory of you.”

Voices whispered back and forth, Cass couldn’t make them all out. Sibilant whispers drilling into his brain…

“Divine Justice has left its mark… he will be our tool…”

“The vampire gave him his mind back.”

“His soul forged anew…”

“Unheard of…”

“He had an anchor—and protection.” A woman’s voice. That voice, he recognized, the vague familiarity pulling at his mind.

“Where do you stand, young King? When all the realms lay balanced in your hands?” A voice came from behind him.

Cass whipped his head around and found no one.

“Behold, a black horse and he who sat upon it a pair of scales in hand.” This time, Cassius recognized the whispers as Barbatos’ voice. “Famine, controlling the desires of man, followed by death upon his pale horse.”

“All the realms shall tremble in the wake of this shift.” The woman’s voice again, this time he saw her. A teasing fleeting glimpse of silken black hair and dark eyes that gleamed like embers… and she was gone again.

He blinked open his eyes and couldn’t move. A second of panic before he realized he was tightly cocooned in blankets, covered by an angel’s wing, the quiet murmurs of conversation beside him.

Jez and Dravite. Jez had his hands in the air, his fingers making pictures, the warlock on his other side chuckling at whatever he was trying to explain.

“Oh, you’re awake again.” Jez turned on his elbow. “All done trying to peel your skin off?”

The angel was smiling, a maniacal glint in his eyes. Cass was still trying to gather his thoughts.

“I think I had a vision,” Cass mumbled.

“You’re an oracle?” Dravite popped up over Jez.

“No,” Cass scoffed, “not ever before.”

“Probably the drugs. You guys got some good stuff,” Dravite said with a nod to herself. “The Priestess is not-mmpf”

Jez’s hand clasped over her mouth.

“Shh, we don’t talk about her.”

“Fuck, you just did,” Cass said, rolling his eyes with a snort. “You can’t say you won’t talk about her, that’s talking about her.”

“But if I don’t say we can’t talk about her how are we all supposed to know we can’t?” Jez gave him a puzzled look.

Dravite was giggling uncontrollably. “You two are fried! Completely high,” she sighed.

“Are we high?” Cass whispered. “Where’d Levistus go? Was he high too?”

“I think so,” Jez whispered back, “he left cause you were kissing me and it’s wrong.”

Dravite laughed louder.

“*You* kissed *me* and it’s not wrong.” Cass got up on his elbow after he fought free of his blanket wrap. “I should go find him.”

He pushed the blankets off the rest of the way and jumped to his feet. And fell right back down. His legs were like water. And he was wearing pajama pants.

Dravite helped him to his feet and pushed him back into bed.

“When did I get dressed?” Cass whispered to Jez, as though the warlock couldn’t hear everything they said to one another.

“You sleep better when you have clothes on,” Jez whispered back with a shrug.

He did, always had. He felt less vulnerable—he hadn’t known Jez picked up on that.

Dravite came back to the bed, Cass hadn’t even noticed she went anywhere.

“There’s a Leira here to see you.” Dravite’s expression gave away nothing.

“No, send her away.” Jez wrapped an arm around Cass… protectively?

“I can’t see her like this. She’ll know I’m high. Tell her to come back later.” Cass shrunk into Jez’s side. “How long are we going to be like this?” he whispered to Jez.

“I don’t know. I’ve never taken anything like this.” Jez whispered back, pressing a kiss to the top of Cass’s head.

Cass wrapped his arm over the angel, clinging to him like an anchor.

“You two are going to be just fine after some sleep. If you’d like I’ll go check on Levistus,” Dravite said, covering them with blankets.

“Yes, please make sure he’s okay,” Cass whispered sleepily.

They lay there in silence for a few moments, listening to the door shut quietly behind the warlock.

“I like her,” Jez quietly said.

“Yes, I noticed.” Cass could barely speak anymore, his eyes feeling like he was blinking over sand.

“Do you remember your vision?” Jez said, speaking just as lazily as Cass.

“I won’t ever forget it.” His mother. That had to have been her.

59

IS THERE A DEMON OF PESTILENCE?

"I'M NOT EVEN GOING TO WASTE MY BREATH BY ASKING WHAT IT IS YOU'RE doing inside my closet En-Levistus, BEGONE!"

The banishment failed, causing her cast a glare at the unwelcome visitor currently sitting upon the floor of her dressing room, amidst a pile of discarded fabrics and undergarments. The effort wasted, he wasn't paying attention.

His face was marked by deep lines of confusion and thoughts, his attention fully riveted upon the item he currently held in his grasp. Recognition struck, her jaw slackening as indignation reddened her cheeks.

"Old man, unhand my bra this instant!"

He ignored her. "Why is there water inside this garment…?"

Finding the legendary Prince of Secrets sitting in a pile of her undergarments had been astounding — watching him pull the bra over his head, positioning the cups to his ears, had her questioning her sanity.

"I think I can hear the ocean!"

With two quick strides she had reached the maddening prince, hooked the elastic strap between two of her fingers, and pulled back.

"What are you doing, I'm still listening to it!"

-*snap*-

He balked when the elastic band recoiled and smacked him in the face. "This is a torture device!" He gave her the most incredulous look she had

ever seen upon a demon while furiously rubbing his nose. “Did you lose a bet? Why would you ever wear such a thing?”

“Highness, you have a visi…tor.”

Er-Agate hurried forward her arms loaded with clothing and trinkets only to come to a sudden stand still at the sight of the demon prince on the floor, picking a fight with a water bra.

Mara looked beyond the clearly flustered female and in the direction she had arrived from, her chambers appearing as if they had been caught in the path of a furious, or rather say *curious*, cyclone.

What, by all the Hells was the demon prince thinking by intruding upon her most private of spaces? He’d absolutely destroyed her closet, and was sitting there looking *amused*. The absolute *gall*.

Er-Agate’s expression was a sour mixture between exasperation, shock and disapproval.

“My apologies Sarratum-sa, I left him unattended for no more than five minutes. I am not sure how he was able to cause so much destruction in such little time.”

“You should see the amount of damage he was capable of wreaking in a century.”

Agate dropped to a knee before her, which was quite the impressive feat without the armload toppling.

“Don’t fret Agate, I don’t place the blame for this at your feet. After all, Prince Levistus has a natural talent for destruction.”

From the pile on the floor Levistus grinned up at her, as if eager to prove her point, his claws sliced through the cup of the bra.

“This isn’t water… what is this sorcery?”

He looked repulsed and somewhat disappointed as he stared at his gel coated fingers. Using the pile of undergarments surrounding him to wipe his hands clean.

The sight of it elicited a cry of outrage from er-Agate. “Sarratum-sa, I should call for the guards...”

Pouring herself a tumbler of fire whiskey, Mara turned to lean her hips against the solid wood, her eyes absorbing the sight of the frazzled demon royal. Just what in the nine hells was going on with the demon prince, what was he doing here? And what had he been searching for within her private chambers?

“No, I’ll question him myself. He appears harmless enough for the moment.”

Her finger trailed along a vial of neon green liquid, hesitating only a moment before adding its contents to her drink, then draining it in one swallow. She shivered with pleasure as the burn of the bourbon flowed down her throat, spreading through her chest. The potion would keep sleep at bay, just a while longer.

The sight of Jareth breaching Cassius’s mind had torn open a laceration within her own psyche, back to that fateful night so long ago. The night her world had ended—Asmodeus ripping apart Cass’s mind and shredding his soul replayed every time she closed her eyes, a vicious loop she couldn’t break free from. The nightmares had been torturous since.

“We both know I’m far from harmless, Priestess.”

His amused tone broke through her dark musings, bringing her back to the moment. Where again she had to blink to confirm that indeed she had demon royalty squatting in her closet, surrounded by piles of her clothing and underwear.

“Indeed. Agate leave us. We’ll have this mess straightened and the clothing items incinerated in the morning.”

Levistus plucked a lacy thong from the pile, gave the garment a befuddled once over and nodded. “There now, that’s an excellent idea, burn the whole lot. I find I’ve no taste for the female fashion of the modern century.”

“Indeed, because the restrictive corsets and rib breaking boning worn in past decades were so much more enjoyable.” Was she seriously entering a discussion regarding her choice of undergarments with this deceitful Prince of Hell? She looked back at the bar, had she used the correct vial? Was she drunk?

“As you command. With your permission I’ll see extra guards placed by your doors.” She knew better than to encourage willfulness in her subjects, but the menacing glare her lady used to pin down the mighty Prince of Secrets was too impressive to discipline.

“Know one thing well Iddimu, one sound or gesture out of place, and this chamber will be filled with my sister’s finest warriors to protect our Sarratum.”

“I vow, mistress Agate; your Queen will not be harmed by me.”

The statement had Mara’s brows raise until they nearly disappeared into her hairline, incredulity marking her every feature. He’d come here for a reason, if not to cause harm, then what?

“Not tonight,” the demon amended, thereby ensuring that the binding his words would form would not prevent him from doing so in the future.

“Very well, Levistus, explain yourself and leave Asurim. Bel-Agate you do your sister credit, her vigilance and warrior ways run through you. Take any measures you see fit and I shall see you in the morning.”

She watched as her first attendant bowed, glaring at the demon as she moved out of the room, arms still filled and expression thunderous.

“If you wake up with boils tomorrow you’ll have none to thank but yourself for that hex.”

“Amara...?”

“No!”

“That hardly seems fair. You don’t even know what I was about to ask!”

She whirled on him, hands on her hips to stop herself from wringing them around his neck.

“You come here uninvited, go through my personal belongings and show me disrespect before my own people.”

This behavior was too bizarre for the legendarily calculated and composed demon royal.

Suspicion had her move for him, then clasp her gloved palms to his cheeks as she tilted his head up to hers. “Are you addled?”

“Are you trying to kiss me, Priestess?”

“Only if I wanted you dead, old man. You haven’t got the tolerance required to survive my affections.”

He pinned her with a scorn filled glare. “Is that why you keep sending Cassius rations of your poisons?”

Her fingers curled against his cheek, baring her claws to slice up his too handsome face, growing more tempted by the second. “No Levistus, I send Cassius poisons to help him escape the anguish your schemes inflicted upon him.”

His gaze flicked to the empty glass now abandoned upon the bar. “Is that why you poison yourself Amara? To escape what my actions did to you?”

She moved her lips to his, keeping the demon only mere a breath away. “For creatures like you and I, there is no escape. You’re a monster, Prince Levistus, and turned me into one. But you won’t get him…”

When she inhaled his breath, her eyes grew wide in surprise, right before she exploded into a fit of laughter. “You reek of psilocybin spores. Oh, but this is priceless, how is Lord Barbatos these days? Did he send you on a spirit quest, is that why you are here? If so, know that I am not about summoning back your dead lover. You won’t get your closure, there’ll be no clemency from me. It’s not a monster’s way.”

The demon’s fingers brushed through the length of her silver hair, his black eyes locked on her. “Aren’t you supposed to be better than that, Amara?”

The smile on her lips was cruel and cold, the only true smile she was left capable of after the events of that long-ago night, the night her world ended, and her heart died. The night Levistus had engineered from inside his icy grave.

“No, I can’t. We’re the same, old man. You made sure of that.”

He went silent as a flash of silver illuminated that captivatingly dark gaze. Whatever emotion had overcome the demon in that instant was gone just as swiftly.

“I didn’t come here for you to summon my Benzosia from the grave.”

“Then why did you come?”

His fingers moved from the length of her hair to the nape of her neck. She tried to swat his touch away, but her movements were sluggish. The potion was taking too long to work, exhaustion from countless days of sleep deprivation beginning to claim its toll, she would need to double the intake.

“You have something of hers.”

She blinked in confusion, trying to clear her mind to think. “You’re mistaken, I possess nothing belonging to Benzosia.”

“Oh, but you most certainly do, Priestess.” His voice had taken on a gentle tone, beguiling. His gaze grew distant, as if locked on a time beyond the one they were standing in.

“Are you aware that Benzosia was gifted in the art of alchemy and potions as well? I could spend hours watching her work, my mind easing with the sight of her meticulously mixing and preparing ingredients for her elaborate concoctions.”

Mara’s brows furrowed. Benzosia had been a potion master? This information was new, and albeit unusual, it was not an entirely uncommon practice for a demoness. Perhaps she was in possession of one of Benzosia’s journals? Was that what he had been searching for? She struggled to straighten onto her feet, breaking his touch.

A glance at her emptied bookshelves made the theory a valid one. Her lips thinned in a grimace at the sight of her precious volumes littered carelessly upon the floor. Those books were valued gifts, they kept her company during her darkest days. Mara counted them amongst her most prized possessions.

Levistus didn’t appear to be hiding a book upon his person at this time, however. Her eyes narrowed, no, in fact the damned demon was still clutching her thong within his free hand.

“Old man, if you don’t unhand my underwear I’ll ensure boils and blisters are the least of your grievances come morning.”

He smirked and looked down at the flimsy scrap of fabric in his grasp, then slowly opened his jacked before depositing the garment within his inner pocket.

“My hands are off...”

“Put... it... back.”

He stared at her from amidst the pile of garments, appearing to give her command serious thought before giving her a smoldering smile. “No, I think I am better off holding onto it for bribery.”

“You’re delusional if you believe you can blackmail me using my own underwear!”

His grin grew impossibly wider. “Then it’s a good thing I didn’t intend it for you.”

His head tilted just before her empty whiskey glass went whizzing past and smashed into brilliant pieces against the wall directly behind him.

“You missed.”

He got to his feet. “As I was about to say before so rudely interrupted. Not unlike you, Benzosia would occasionally make use of neurotoxins to cause sleep deprivation in her victims. I saw you add the venom to your whiskey, Amara, and I could scent its sweet smell on your breath just as you could scent the psilocybin on mine. Why aren’t you sleeping?”

Her mind jostled at his directness. “You have no right to question me, Prince Levistus. What were you looking for amongst my belongings?”

She stepped back to steady herself against the bar when she suddenly swayed on her feet. Had her words slurred? Her eyes were growing heavy, her thoughts slow and sluggish. Again, she looked at the vial upon the bar, a horrific notion filtering through the thick fog of her head.

“What did you do to my drink?”

“You need to sleep.”

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” She was resistant to most poisons, she should not be able to die from anything he could’ve used to contaminate her potion. “You vowed not to harm me, we had an agreement...”

He stood before her then, towering over her. She wanted to push him away, but her limbs felt too heavy too heavy to lift. What in the hells had he done to her?

“I diffused the venom, rendering it useless. What you’re sensing is the side effect of the sleeping potion I discovered amongst your concoctions. It was negligent of you to leave such potent stuff laying around, Priestess.”

The potion Agate had obtained from En-Rasputin, she realized, the mad monk had brewed it with her tolerance in mind. She wouldn’t be able to fight off its effects for long.

“Why…?”

The world spun around her, her death grip on the bar all that held her upright. Strong fingers closed around her throat, his thumb brushing lazily along the outline of the jugular vein.

“After I managed to lessen the effects of the spores on my mind, I was about to call it a night myself. Then I overheard a briefing by our spies, observing how it had been at least thirteen days since their Queen last slept.

“Eleven is enough for a mortal to perish. You may not be mortal, Amara, but you are young still and this isn’t healthy behavior for a young lady. So... why aren’t you sleeping?”

“Fuck off…” The pressure against her vein increased, her vision darkening around the edges.

“Near the end, Benzosia used the venom on herself as well. Turns out that my love had grown fearful of her own dreams. She never told me, the stubborn creature, and I was too self involved recognize the signs. She lasted twenty-eight days before her mind broke…”

“Let... go...” She could feel her head loll to the side, her eyes falling closed. That beckoning darkness was pulling her under, her magick

subdued by the gaping abyss that welcomed her into its embrace.

"You asked me what you possess that belonged to my sweet Benzosia?"

Her breathing evened, and her body lost strength. She expected to feel the impact of cold stone beneath her, but instead she was floating weightlessly.

"You have your grandmother's eyes, Amara. When I stare into your beautiful and damning gaze, I can see my Benzosia glare at me from beyond her grave."

WITH THE UTMOST CARE, Levistus placed Amara's sleeping form on her bed, his energy enveloping the protection barriers she kept in place around her mind. As gently as he could he persuaded her subconscious suppress the memories which haunted her, memories his actions had placed there. He engulfed her mind, not invading it, merely offering her exhausted psyche a brief moment of reprieve. This way he could hold guard over her dreams, keeping the nightmares at bay, if only for one night.

"Forgive me, granddaughter."

PART II

60

REMEMBER MY NAME

Five hundred and twenty two years ago, within the dungeons of the Nessus

"AUUUW!"

A jolt of pain roused her from sleep, the rock that caused it bouncing off the dense basalt that served as her pillow. She flinched, brushing her fingers over her left temple, the tips coming away coated with blood, a warm, sticky trail of it trickling down her forehead and onto her cheek.

They'd returned. Why wouldn't they just leave her alone? What was so fun about tormenting a caged animal?

"Sordes! Sordes!"

The miserable group that snuck into the dungeons to torment her always called her *filth*, their puny brains unable to come up with anything more original. It wasn't even an insult anymore, but fact; she was more filth than animal at this point.

The stink inside her five by five cell had long stopped offending, the dirt and rodents no longer a concern. And if it bothered them, well, they could simply go away.

Please go away…

She'd lost track of how long she'd been locked away in this dungeon. It'd been long while, for she outgrew the pretty pink dress her sisters had gifted her on her sixth birthday, her hair had grown long, tangled and dirty. A few years had passed, maybe?

"Sordes! Sordes!"

Their taunts echoed through the dimly lit corridor before filtering through the small barred opening. That small window was her only connection to the outside world, giving her view of the dungeon hall and the empty cells which surrounded her own.

Except for her guard, no one entered this secluded part of the dungeons, and even he kept his time down here short. Good. No company was preferable over his. Sahu, ‘pig’, as she’d come to call him, was a beast of a demon who seemed to obtain much delight in frightening her. With no distinction between day or night, time itself ceased to exist, only Sahu’s appearance and her own physical changes were the only proof that time was passing.

After checking the rune magicks which concealed her, Sahu would always take a moment to snarl and shriek at her through the bars, before disappearing again. This had been the routine for a while now, until one day, or night, this gaggle of goons had discovered her.

“Sordes! Sordes!”

At first she had begged them for help, to let someone in Asurim know she was here, that she was alive. But they hadn’t understood her language, and her knowledge of Latin was sparse. It took several rounds of them assaulting her with rocks for Amara to deduce there would be no help coming from them.

She curled up in agitation, sleep wouldn’t come as long as they continued yelling, their voices too shrill and loud to ignore. After a while her hearing had become attuned to the quiet, and the soft noises within which would go unnoticed by most. The soft scratching of rodents, the light rumble of rock sliding as the foundation quaked ever so lightly. She’d heard stories from her mother’s court that Hell shook when the King of the Nessus was angry. If those rumors were true, then Asmodeus was always in a foul mood.

Compared to those small sounds, their screams boomed like thunder in her ears.

Please just go away…

She wanted to sleep. Dreaming was the only way she could keep her mind distracted from what she had come to accept as her inevitable fate. King Asmodeus had banished her to this cell to wither away, killing her would’ve been kinder. Hunger and thirst ruled her when she wasn’t asleep.

She would not easily die from starvation and disease compared to the fragile mortals of Gaia, an odd thing to envy really. But her immortality hadn't yet set in, and she could die, *would* die, just slowly.

Gods she wanted to sleep, to not think about her thirst, nor feel the pain of her hunger, or how much she missed her sisters.

"Sordes! Sordes!"

A second barrage of rocks whizzed through the small window to her cell. Most of their ammunition bouncing off the iron bars without hitting target, but enough always made it through to injure.

There was nowhere to hide in a five by five cell, all she could do was curl into a corner and wrap her arms around her head, protecting herself best she could.

"Auuuw, enough!"

Her cry tore through her cell when a sharp rock connected with her back. The sound dying off quickly as she leaned her head against the stone wall, shutting her eyes tightly to ward off the growing dizziness as her body protested the expenditure of energy. That familiar sticky warmth was sliding down her back as she curled deeper into her corner, turning herself into as small a target possible.

Had she possessed any of her father's magicks, she would cast an enchantment upon their puny little minds, enthralling each of them to slam their skulls against the walls of her cell until their brains spilled out. Luckily for them she hadn't grown into her powers yet, and just like immortality, she never would.

"Sordes, Sor… suus 'usque ad Messiam Principem, currere!"

Filth, run... prince? Their screams preceded the sound of their running feet. Maybe Sahu had returned? Although she had a hard time thinking of the pig demon as a prince.

Barely concluding the age of five, Amara had only just begun her education in foreign languages before she'd been tossed into this cell. The only reason she understood the word 'Sordes' was due to the fact her mother had used it upon occasion to describe people; after her mother had referred to her half sisters as such, Amara had taken it upon herself to sneak off into the library and look up its meaning. Filth. She loved her three sisters. Calista, Morgaine, and Narissa. They weren't filth, they were wonderful, and she missed them so, so much.

Scratch, scratch… scratch.

Curiosity had her turning toward the new sound, expecting to find a hungry rodent, only to jerk back in surprise at the sight of something clawing at the bars of her prison. That something was most definitely not a rat.

Her brows knitted in confusion when first a finger, then a hand, then a whole arm pushed through the iron bars, her eyes widening as said hand began to blindly pat the floor, nearly reaching her foot.

Pat, Pat, Pat

Was it was beckoning for her to come closer?

“Oh no. No way… SHOOO!” She’d fallen for this trick before with the gaggle of goons. As soon as she’d come close, they made a grab for her. She’d managed to free herself by biting them, but they had ripped her dress and hair. The dress she needed, the hair hurt.

A soft snarl passed her lips at the memory, she would bite anyone who dared touch her. Whoever was on the other side of the iron bars seemed decided towards ignoring her warning sound and keep calling for her.

Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat

Something inside her snapped, she just wanted to sleep, to forget. If she was to die, why couldn't they at least let her do so in peace?

The snarl turned into growl, someone was very eager to see the filthy animal stuck in her cage. They wanted to see a beast? Fine. She would give them one.

With a speed she’d not thought herself capable of she lunged for the arm. Then, emboldened by her anger and a heady rush of adrenaline Amara bit down into the firm flesh within her grasp.

“AHHHH, mihi dimittere te, creatura curet!”

The being on the other side of the bars thrashed and struggled to get free, but she held on tight, feeling her teeth slice through flesh until she tasted warm copper against her tongue, blood.

She released her bite, with a dawning sense of horror, letting out an audible whimper before scrambling back into her corner and spitting out the offensive taste. She really was an animal.

“Go away!” Hot tears mixed with the blood on her cheeks, “Why can't you all just leave me be?” She was so tired and hungry, she just wanted to sleep. Why couldn’t they just let her sleep?

“Tu iustus a puella!”

Her head snapped up in recognition of that one word, thanks to the few unintended lessons while listening to whispered gossip among her mother’s courtiers within the Asurian palace. Ignoring the pang of dizziness and pain she rushed back to the bars as swiftly as her uncooperative body would allow. Despair took root at the sight of the unfamiliar being already making his way out the dungeon corridor. Not wasting a second she stretched her hand past the bars and slammed her palm against the ground as forcefully as she could.

Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat

“Come back!”

Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat

“Please!”

She didn’t care that the person on the other side of the bars wouldn’t be able to understand her. Right now, all she cared about was the fact that the voice on the other side hadn’t called her filth, instead, it had called her *puella*, he called her a *girl*.

Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat

Her palm kept frantically pounding the stone outside the bars until she finally could no longer hear the fall of footsteps. After a few more moments passed, she crawled back into her corner in defeat, then curled up, pressing her throbbing head against her knees before letting out a soft sob of misery.

“*Stupid girl. Hope is a crutch for the weak.*”

Her mother's words rang through her mind as she tiredly closed her eyes, forcing herself to go back to sleep. In dreams she always had a full belly, was clean and dressed in pretty fabrics. She was healthy and strong. There she always reunited with her father and her half sisters, and each time she made sure to tell them how much she had missed them as they embraced her tightly.

Scratch, scratch… Pat, Pat, Pat

She shut her eyes tightly, reluctant to release her hold on that dream, refusing to wake. Then her head shot up as the most amazing scent assailed her nose.

Through the darkness she could make out the shape of a small box being pushed through the bars, and once familiar aromas began to register. Butter, honey... warm bread. Her mouth flooded with saliva, it dripped down her lips and chin, her stomach joining the excitement by giving an

audible roar at the offering. Her eyes remained transfixed upon the small box, but she didn't dare move. Surely it was a trap...

“Puella, manducare!”

That voice, It belonged to that same prince creature she had bit, the one who for a second time had called her ‘girl’. And it was trying to... *feed* her?

Despite being strongly hesitant, Amara found herself inching forward, lured by the rich scent of food.

The next instant her nose was pressed against the box, her senses ensnared by the promise of food. Gods it smelled so good, and she could feel that whatever was in there was still warm.

Dirt caked fingers reverently stroked along the edge of the closed box as she contemplated her options. Maybe it was poisoned. Maybe it was a trap. Or maybe it wanted a trade? She looked around, already knowing she had nothing worthy to trade with. Better the prince creature not find that out until she had claimed the contents of the box so he didn’t have the chance to reconsider.

She made quick work of opening the lid, her jaw dropping at the sight of the stuffed pastry inside, then the box was snatched away, the prince pulling it back through the iron bars before she had been able to grab it. Without thinking she chased after it, her hands reaching outward beyond the iron bars, desperately grasping for the box.

“Hungry…”

Eyes the color of burning coals locked with hers, and for a few moments they curiously stared at each other, the box forgotten. Through the dimly lit corridors she could make out the self-satisfied grin upon his lips, then she sensed the dormant power within him. *Danger.* Alarm shot through her awareness as she recognized the energy imprint.

“Asmodeus.”

Bread forgotten, she scrambled up as quickly as could from her position on the floor, needing to place as much distance as possible between her and whatever creature the King of Hell had sent her way.

“Nihil, Puella…” The package was pushed back through the bars, this time with enough force to land at her feet.

Hunger beat fear, and before he could think to snatch it back again, she tore into the box, uncaring that she was audibly snarling and growling while savagely devouring its heavenly contents. At that first bite her eyes

closed in bliss, and menacing growls mixed with groans of pleasure as the sweet bread melted upon her tongue.

Those curious eyes kept watching her as she licked the taste of honey from her lips, then she grimaced then shrugged before popping her dirt caked fingers into her mouth, greedily hunting for any taste that remained.

“Auuuw?”

She looked up to the bars and tilted her head, moving to look at him. He had moved back a bit, and she could make out the features of not a creature, but a boy. A devastatingly beautiful boy.

Pastry gone and box empty she scooted back again, suddenly aware of the fact she wore barely more than the thread-thin rags of her faded pink dress, and quickly made sure she was decently covered where it mattered most. She stared down at herself, and even the darkness of her cell couldn’t obscure the filth and grime clinging to her skin and tatters of clothing. A small, hesitant sniff revealed what she already knew to be true —she reeked.

Her nose lifted up in the air, blocking out her own odor. He smelled nice. And he was beautiful. She could’ve done without that self awareness, but was still grateful for the food now churning inside her belly.

Pat, Pat, Pat

The beautiful boy was trying to get her attention again, and when she looked back, she noticed he was holding up a small jar in one hand while gesturing wildly with his other hand.

“Auuuw?”

She recognized the sound of the cry, it sounded like hers when she was hurt. Had he seen what had happened earlier? Did that mean he had chased the gaggle of goons away on purpose? Why would he do that?

He beckoned for her again and giving in to growing curiosity, Amara inched her way back to the bars, with the beautiful boy standing at the other side.

Pat, Pat, Pat

“Auuuw!”

He was gesturing wildly, demanding to see her injury?

In her confusion she obeyed, easing her hair away from her temple, the dirty strands sticking against the wound with crusted blood. She ripped the hair away, and he flinched. Again she backed into her corner, feeling

strangely hurt by his disgust. Her head lifted with stubborn pride. Oh well, he could leave now if he wanted, she'd already finished the bread anyway.

But he didn't go away, instead he opened the jar and scooped out a generous glob of tacky goop out with his fingers. He then shoved both his arms through the bars, giving her a clear view of the torn skin and teeth marks she had left there. A pang of remorse shot through her at the sight of it.

"Auuuw."

He spread the goop over the damaged skin, the vague scent of herbs and healing magick wafting upwards as he spread it over his wound. Had her nursemaid not applied similar stuff on her anytime she had scraped or bumped herself? Her eyes widened in disbelief, *Medicine*. The beautiful boy brought her medicine?

He smiled at the sight of her dawning comprehension and pushed the jar towards her. Amara reached for it greedily and clutched the jar to her chest, her eyes finding his and not letting go. She couldn't begin to imagine what had motivated him to help her, it could still be a trap, but with the gift of a food and a jar of medicine, he had given her back some of the hope she had lost within these four walls.

In the distance, the sound of yelling could be heard, and she caught a flash of panic within those fire-lit eyes. Dark gods, it wasn't a trap, he wasn't supposed to be here. Finally someone had been kind to her, and in turn she was going to get him in trouble.

"Shoo, go away silly boy, and don't come back!"

Knowing he wouldn't understand her she shook her head at him curled back into her corner, giving him a hiss for good measure before decisively turning her back on him.

Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat

She ignored him. The fool was going to get himself in trouble.

"Puella, Cassius." He said it with such conviction that she couldn't help but peek over her shoulder at him. What in the nine hells was a Cassius?

He was pointing at his chest. "Cassius."

His head tilted proudly, mimicking her earlier move, and when she grinned at the gesture a goofy smile spread across his face. Why did he tell her his name? Was he fading? Narissa had told her once that demons were prone to fading just like the gods were, that's why they kept warlocks.

But that couldn’t be right, he was a prince, stamped with the power of Asmodeus. Perhaps the beautiful Cassius was a little slow in the head, not understanding the risk he took by revealing himself to her? She grimaced, instantly rejecting the idea. She’d seen the spark of intelligence within those warm eyes. He had brought her food and medicine. He had looked beyond the caged animal to find her. He had more sense than most.

The voices sounded closer, and his head snapped up from the bars to gauge the distance. A sense of overwhelming panic struck her when Cassius let go of the bars, nodded at her, and then turned away.

Instinct took over and she bolted for the bars as she hurriedly tore at the cleanest part of her tattered dress, peeling free a ribbon of faded pink, shoving it through the iron bars at him. She would die within these walls, but perhaps she wouldn’t be entirely forgotten. Maybe the beautiful boy would look upon this ribbon one day and remember the kindness he had done, and through it, he would remember her.

Her heart jumped in her chest when he hurried back and eagerly reached for the offered ribbon, taking it from her as if she had presented him with a treasure. And in a way she had, for she had given him the best piece of the only thing she possessed, she had given beautiful Cassius the best bit of her birthday dress, of her memories.

As their fingers brushed she whispered to him in a small voice,

“Amara... my name is Amara.”

61

THE FORTRESS WAS LEFT UNDEFENDED

HER EYES FLEW OPEN ON A GASP OF AIR, THE URGE TO CRY OUT HIS NAME overwhelming. She bit down on her bottom lip hard enough to taste the coppery tang of blood, the sense of loss so acute it caused a physical ache that cleaved through her chest.

My beautiful Cassius, in the end you had no choice but to forget.

Closing her eyes once more, she tried to calm her mind and ease her rising panic, reminding herself of where she was. After nearly four hundred years, she'd escaped her imprisonment and now lay sheltered inside the safety of her own spacious bedchambers within the ninth temple.

She could picture it in her mind, the high cathedral ceilings of her chambers, the stained glass windows which colored the dark stone walls with rays of deep blue, rich emerald, bright crimson and gold when the purple sun shone through them. She was in Libiden, the ninth Dominion of Asurim. Her realm.

Inhale, exhale

No longer was she a prisoner, she'd risen to claim her place as rightful Sarratum of Asurim, and with it, she had taken on her duties as Zagmi, high priestess to the ancient gods. No longer was she a dying, frightened little girl.

Another life, a different girl, a different demon

She'd left that pitiful creature behind in the Malsheem, buried alongside her demon, her heart. And until recently, her memories had

shared that shallow grave. Lately, they tormented.

When she finally felt composed enough to open her eyes and sit up, she blinked in confusion, her jaw slackening in shock. Her chambers lay in ruins.

Her precious collection of fabrics were strewn about the room. Precious books and valuable notes appeared to have been scoured through before being carelessly discarded. Bottles and jars of hair oils, perfumes and glamour tinctures which she kept neatly assorted atop her boudoir were tipped over, their contents still dripping onto the soaked threads of the thick rug covering the onyx stone floor.

Her gaze flew to her poison cabinet. Each potion and elixir she had neglected to lock away had been destroyed. *What in the nine hells…?*

The grip of memories eased, the familiar fog clouding her mind dissipating. *Traces of sleeping tincture?* Awareness returned in a flash of memory. *Levistus…*

The damned Prince of Secrets had tricked her. With her own poisons, no less.

“Shit!”

In a blind panic, she called for the guards stationed outside her chambers, demanding Domina Elmira be summoned at once.

Er-Agate chose that moment to enter, her attendant coming to a stunned halt at the sight of the chaos greeting her. Amara bristled, her anxiety spiking at the very real possibility the demon prince had successfully breached the barriers of her mind while she had slept, while she dreamed. There was plenty of information she possessed which he should learn nothing about, weaknesses he could exploit.

Er-Agate began puttering around, collecting the yards of fabrics and sending them off of for cleaning and pressing while Amara herself made quick inventory of the items, looking for anything missing as they awaited Elmira’s arrival.

“Knew he was up to no good. He was out of his mind and you allowed him to stay,” Agate kept nattering away as she put things to rights, “I realize he’s loyal to our Sarrum, but that doesn’t mean that carries over to yourself.”

She held up the ruined brassiere with a scowl, not registering Amara’s hiss at her use of the designation.

Could her head throb any harder? Clearly, the lout had been suffering a heavy hand with the sleeping tincture. It was rather astounding she was awake and upright, even if her legs did wobble a bit.

With a groan, Amara lowered her aching head back into the palm of her hand. For all her cheekiness Agate was right, she'd acted far too reckless, when would she finally learn to temper her pride in favor of solid judgment?

It took the oracle only minutes to arrive after being summoned, entering the chambers in a whirlwind of incense and soothing energy, her presence instantly easing the tension in Amara's shoulders.

"Elmira..."

With bleary eyes, she gazed up to find her Domina dressed in extravagant robes concealing her not so extravagant sleeping attire. Her silvery gaze took in the condition of the chambers before she moved to sit beside Amara upon the divan.

Shame and anxiety made her voice sound small when she finally addressed her Domina.

"I fear I may have made a horrible mistake."

Agate stopped to watch, the armload of books she carried thudding onto the surface of a writing desk. Both women were staring at her if she'd suddenly sprouted an extra limb somewhere. Not too surprising, admitting weakness or defeat was not something that came easy to any of warlock heritage, more so for Amara, who was notoriously afflicted with stubbornness and pride.

Elmira's fingers pressed to her temples, her touch gentle while easing the thrumming pressure behind Amara's eyes, easing the pain inside her head.

"Your barriers are intact, Sarratum-sa. You merely suffer from the side effects of an overdose," Elmira said with a reassuring nod. "Unwise as your decision was to trust the demon prince, he caused no harm upon your person."

Agate snorted, holding up the ruined brassiere once again as to prove otherwise.

Elmira's brows disappeared into the intricate folds of her golden turban. "Should I ask?"

Memory struck, and beneath her breath Amara released a pained grunt. "He wanted to hear the ocean."

What exactly had Levistus's objective been, and what had he been searching for?

"Agate, I need clothes for Gaia."

She forewent morning bathing rituals to hurry into the offered garbs, leaving both women to stare at her in confusion. It was yet another anomaly, both were well acquainted with her compulsive bathing habits. Morning and night she bathed, insisting her hair be washed and oiled, as she scrubbed and perfumed her body.

"I'm leaving for a few days and will return before the full moon. Except for the two of you, it's best if others were left uninformed of my destination."

Agate gave her a dubious look but acquiesced without the usual retort.

Not an hour later Amara stood upon the soil of the mortal realm, roughly popping a set of earbuds into her ears before turning up the volume on her music player. Within seconds, the notes of a solo harp rose, its gentle song soon joined by a symphony of flutes and violins turning the sweet melody of Danse Macabre haunting.

Looking around she noted how much the landscape had altered since her last visit when she had unsuccessfully attempted to secret away the Sword of Justice within the protection of Gaia.

Back then the trees at the forest's edge had been barren, now they sprouted green with leaves as nature began to awaken from its deep winter slumber. The scenery made her glad she opted to travel through an established portal rather than summon one to take her directly to her home. The brisk walk did her good, and she'd needed the time and solitude of the short journey to think.

No matter how hard she tried, she simply couldn't figure out what it was the demon prince had been searching for among her belongings. As if she were stupid enough to keep anything of true importance hidden within her own chambers.

The nine temples were infested with spies pretending to be worshipers, she and her Dominae made good use of them by intentionally planting false and conflicting information for them to report to the peers of the realms.

Giving into impulse, she stopped at the quaint village market, reminded that she would require some essential supplies during her stay. At the sight of the tacky Easter display Amara had nearly turned about,

Ostara yet another memory she wished to forget. Yet before she could set a foot outside the door she walked past a colorful display of chocolate eggs, which had become a traditional offering in Gaia to celebrate the season.

A few minutes later Amara left the small establishment carrying a plastic bag filled with Cadbury chocolates and a bottle of dessert wine. Essentials acquired, she continued her way towards her cottage.

Returning to Gaia hadn't been part of her immediate plan, but desperate times called for drastic measures. While under scrutiny from Elmira and Agate, she concluded that recent events had left her emotionally unbalanced, judgment and actions clouded.

It was best if she took time for herself, focus on repressing the memories which tormented her sleep. Within Asurim her thoughts found no peace, and she was hardly allowed any solitude. And then there was the relentless temptation to step through the portal in search of the sin-eater.

He didn't know that she'd been left no option but to push him away. She recalled the look of hurt and betrayal in those coal-dark eyes, her stomach clenching painfully. Death was on the prowl.

Sending her General into his harem had been an agonizing decision, leaving her plagued by regret, doubt, jealousy, and resentment. The sentiments irrational, she was aware, but that didn't lessen their impact. The current solution allowed for her to keep a link to the demon while staying in the shadows. Dravite would protect the sin-eater, and to do so her general had needed access to his bed, and to him.

The music reached a crescendo, heavy drums jolting her from darkening thoughts. Already she could make out the silhouette of her Victorian cottage in the distance.

Mortals rarely passed by her home, the Fae wards she'd placed stayed charged despite the drain from the ley-lines, their influence repelling both mortal and immortal away from her home. Those who came near were reminded of having left the kettle burning upon the stove, or suddenly remembered an urgent errand they neglected. The few who wouldn't be deterred from their path would find the cottage abandoned and dilapidated, its grounds wild and unkempt. Reality was quite different.

The stone exterior had been painted a plum color, the roof tiles and windows framing it in darkest black. The elaborate wooden carvings which were typical of the Victorian era had also been painted black, their details

highlighted in gold. The result was judged too Gothic for some, too gaudy for others, but to her, it was absolute perfection.

The stately yet quirky cottage offered her the closest thing she had to a home of her own and provided her with a small taste of freedom and individuality she so desperately craved. Here she'd discovered the simple joy of a day spent working in her gardens, and nights devoted to bingeing classic horror movies and pizza.

The porch creaked in welcome as she climbed its wooden steps. The plastic bag she carried landed with a soft thunk as she dropped it to the side to reach for the hexed spare key hidden beneath the welcome mat which aptly read 'Go Away'. It was only fair to give unexpected company a warning about the welcome they would be receiving. None.

Turning the key in the lock she let out an audible groan, her mind fixed on a warm bath — that illusion bursting as a sudden spark of infernal energy charged the surrounding air. With an agitated tug, she pulled the earbuds free and turned towards the origin of the opening portal.

"A few fucking days to myself is that truly too much to ask fo… Maleficus?"

62

LOVE AND CHOCOLATE

SHOCK WAS TOO WEAK A WORD TO EXPRESS HOW SHE FELT AT DISCOVERING her young ward stepping out of the portal, hands balled into small fists as he walked towards her, precariously swaying on his feet.

“Sarratum-sa.”

“Dark gods!” The next moment she had gathered him into her arms, effectively preventing the scrawny creature from face planting onto the wooden porch. “Listen to me young warlock, no passing out. It’s just you and me out here, and I’d make a terrible nurse.”

Slowly but surely, his unfocused gaze sharpened, and it didn’t take long before the cheeky creature looked up at her with a gloating grin.

“I did it!”

“Right...” Looking around she could see no chaperone, no additional portal, nothing that could help make sense out of his sudden appearance. “What exactly *did* you do?”

Shock eased as she stared at her young ward, while mentally running through a rapid assessment. He’d gained a little weight over the recent weeks, but still not enough to properly fill out his lanky frame. His unruly mop of hair had recently been trimmed, proudly revealing the small horns protruding from his head. The fact he was no longer trying to hide away those striking features pleased her. In all, she concluded that the boy looked healthy and cared for. So why then was he here?

The proud grin wore transformed into a sheepish expression as she bestowed him with the same stern look her sisters had always pinned her

with. It worked wonders with her Dominae.

“The Magisters at the Academy taught us how to scry, I remembered the advanced students were using blood to practice portals.”

The last time she had seen Maleficus he had been practicing circles in the courtyard of the academy. His enthusiasm and curiosity made her proud, the boy possessed a sharp mind and keen observation. *Had he actually succeeded?*

“I scried for your location, drew a circle with my blood to fortify a portal, and commanded it to take me to you… I feel dizzy.”

Her eyes moved to the deep cut at his palm. “I think perhaps you were a bit too generous with your blood. We’ll need to get that cut stitched up so it won’t leave a scar.” The boy had enough of those already.

The small hand was pulled back in horror. “Nu-uh, you said you made a terrible nurse”

She simply couldn’t hold the stern look, her own grin at his expression ruining its effect. “Yes, but I am excellent with needle and thread. You should see some of the work I do on zombi....never mind that.”

She turned his face to look at her. “Maleficus, why did you come here?”

That sheepish smile he wore slipped. “I have something to show you, and the Magisters told me you were too busy to come visit me, so I came to visit you instead.”

“Indeed…” In hindsight, the Academy perhaps wasn’t the best place for him after all. He could be tutored under the direct supervision of her Dominae rather than the Magisters, they would know how fully develop his obvious potential.

It was Dominus Malachi who’d pointed out that Maleficus would never grow up to live a normal life, and she was forced to agree with his assessment. Not because of the controversy regarding his mixed heritage, but because there was little doubt in her mind that Maleficus was extraordinarily gifted. This boy was marked for greatness, she could sense it in his spirit.

An idea took hold, one which would help resolve a dilemma which plagued her mind ever since her encounter with the brutish Gargoyle chieftain during the ceremony of Ostara.

What better way to make Warlock and Gargoyle equals under one banner...

Grimorum had been a fool with a death wish, but that particular statement had stayed with her. Even after abolishing gargoyle slavery and declaring their kind equal to warlocks in rights and privileges, discrimination remained a reoccurring issue. Perhaps it was the boy's destiny to succeed where she was failing, to unite gargoyles and warlocks as one.

Not only had the boy displayed incredible potential, but he was also the first child born to a warlock in over three centuries. What if he wasn't simply meant to become accepted as her ward — what if he were destined to become her heir? The thought held merit.

One day he could rule Asurim as Sarrum, then she could focus on her duties as High Priestess instead. Amara was the last descendant of her line, after her, there would be none left to succeed to the throne. It was the perfect solution.

"What's that?"

His curious tone forced her to abandon her musings, his bright green eyes fixated upon the colorful wrappers of the candies inside the abandoned shopping bag.

"It's chocolate."

The blank stare he gave her a swift reminder to the fact that chocolate was not a well-known delicacy within their realm.

"Chocolate." He was mouthing the foreign word, storing it into memory the same way she often did when studying intricate incantations. "What's it used for?"

With a grin, she reached for the bag and pulled out a brightly wrapped piece of candy before offering it to him.

"You eat it, just like the sugar sweets in Asurim, these are treats mortals like to eat."

"For me?" First, there was awe as he tentatively reached for the offered treat, then the small creature turned near feral as he excitedly tore through the colorful wrapping to take an eager bite.

"Easy now, it won't run away." Unlike some of Asurim's more popular candies, which had been enchanted to play tricks on the children who tried to eat them too quickly.

When the first taste of chocolate melted upon his tongue, those curious green eyes grew big as saucers, his expression full of shocked awe.

"I like chocolate!"

She watched in fascinated horror as he shoved the entire egg into his mouth before lunging like a predator upon the defenseless shopping bag.

“Oh no you don’t.” She barely managed to pull the bag away in time, and closed it quickly before greedy fingers could lay claim to another piece. “Trust me on this one, dizziness and chocolate don’t mix well together. Finish the piece you’re still chewing and maybe later when you’re fully adjusted to the drain from the ley-lines you may select another.”

His face lit up at the prospect, he was clearly in possession of a well-developed sweet tooth. *So similar to…* she shook her head.

She really needed to get a grip, the brain maggot infestation she suffered was getting out of control. Somehow she needed to focus, and put the memories to rest once more.

“Sarratum, you’re still sad.”

Her fingers ran through that wild mop of hair, the touch not the same as the one she craved, but comforting nonetheless.

“You shouldn’t worry about me, you’re the one in big trouble for ditching school.”

The sight of his faltering smile tugged at something deep inside of her. Somehow she wanted to protect that smile, treasure it just for a little while.

“Since immediately returning to Asurim won’t serve to lift either of our spirits, this is what I suggest. I’ll have Head-Magister Kadeon notified that you are safe and that you’ll be spending the night on Gaia. Once you’ve settled we’ll discuss what was so important that you risked your own safety by coming here.” At the small reprimand, the boy’s expression soured.

“That should leave you with plenty of time to raid the contents of that bag at your leisure.”

A wide smile lit up his face, the excitement within vivid green gaze contagious. Truly, what harm could one evening cause? She had questions for him and would be glad for his company.

“Tomorrow we return to Asurim together, where you’ll apologize to the Magisters for leaving without permission, and graciously accept whatever punishment Head-Magister Kadeon feels befits the breaking of his rules. Agreed?”

Maleficus jumped and wrapped his arms around her neck, his embrace so unexpected it nearly toppled her over. “Agreed!”

Bright energy brushed along her senses, one she hadn’t felt in the better part of a century, its imprint similar to the sensation of warm sunlight kissing away an icy chill. It flowed from him directly into her, spreading through her. Then next instant recognition struck, and that blessed warmth turned to cold dread, chilling her down to her core.

“Maleficus, don’t...”

The boy hadn’t said a word but it wasn’t necessary, what she felt couldn’t be confused for any other energy. It was pure and innocent, and she recognized it for what it was—*love*.

Another energy bled through the atmosphere, its malevolent imprint causing the cool evening breeze to still, the birds in the distant tree-line grew quiet. The hairs at the back of her neck and arms stood up as the mortal world around them grew eerily silent.

“Sarratum-sa, what’s happening?”

Her grip on him tightened, her heart pounding erratically against her ribs as fear grabbed hold, her palms growing sweaty. This couldn’t be happening, she had been so careful. *Not careful enough...*

“Namtar, no! He’s just a small boy. Please, he has no understanding of what he feels. This doesn’t count!”

Malice enveloped them, the air growing heavy with it. The rancor of death and disease teased her senses.

“Understanding of an emotion is irrelevant, love needs only to be felt. My curse on you is binding and unbreakable.”

Clammy fingers closed around the hilt of her athame, which she kept hidden from mortal sight within the inside pocket of her jacket. Due to the ley-lines, she wouldn’t be able to draw much energy, but it would have to be enough.

Not wasting a second, she drew the blade across her palm while summoning a portal for them to escape. Yet as soon as her blood made contact with the expanding circle, the portal folded into itself and collapsed. The drain from the ley-lines combined with Namtar’s own interference made magick too unstable to sustain a gateway between the realms.

“Priestess, when will you learn? No matter how much you defy fate, there is simply no escaping it.”

Pulling both Maleficus and her athame against her chest, she absorbed as much of its stored power as she could manage, converting the infernal energy it into darkness and casting it out before the ley-lines could lay claim. Power flared out around them like a black flame, hissing and snapping at the Sumerian death god.

It's not going to work...

Present and past blurred together. She had let them die... her sisters, her Cassius—she failed to save them. And now death came for the boy.

She clutched Maleficus into a desperate embrace, unwilling to surrender to him. She could feel the ley-lines leach her magick, forcing her to drop the link to the collapsed portal and focus all her energy into conjuring the most powerful protection circle she had ever attempted. Both hope and trepidation filling her as she watched tendrils of black and gold weave together to shield them away from Namtar's reach.

Hope was shattered when a bandaged hand effortlessly breached through the barrier. Leaving Amara helpless to do anything but stare in horror as decayed fingers closed over Maleficus slender shoulder.

"I don't feel so good. Think you were right about the chocolate..."

Bile washed up her throat when she looked upon him. His gaze unfocused, his body growing cold in her arms as blood streamed down in thick rivulets from his nose and ears. He wasn't immortal, he was just a boy.

"It's only tummy ache... it'll pass soon." A lie, one as well-intended as it was unconvincing.

She knew Maleficus didn't believe her, yet still, he managed to smile up at her as if it were his task to ease her rather than the other way around.

"Don't go, please." Her lips pressed against his cool and clammy forehead, comforting him while fighting off her own urge to scream.

"You have your deal, I agree to the contract if you release Maleficus now." She looked up, meeting Namtar's smug face with all the desperation she felt. "Don't you understand what fate you are condemning him to? He's an innocent!"

As with all warlocks, the infernal energy he consumed would bar him from reaching the Heavens upon death, and Hell was not a place an innocent soul could survive. Warlocks were dark beings, innocence lost quickly in their world.

Maleficus was different, he'd barely begun to discover his magick, had been imprisoned all this time with only limited exposure to the infernal energy their kind consumed. To her knowledge, the boy had never committed a true act of evil, had never offered a sacrifice to the gods nor committed a mortal sin. He was an innocent.

His mocking laugh enveloped her. "I warned you that one day you would look back and come to regret you did not take up my offer when it was made."

His boisterous voice condensed to nothing more than a whisper by her ear. "You denied me then, I'm denying you now."

Small fingers tangled through hers, pulling her attention away from the gloating death god back to the dying child in her arms as he pressed a scrap of paper being into her hand.

"I told you I would make it right…" His lips twisted into a small smile, causing a small bubble of blood to pop between his lips.

She brushed her fingers through the mop of unruly hair, her voice a broken whisper as she cradled him to her. He jerked in her arms as she hugged him tightly, not letting go even as his frail body started to go lax in her hold.

"Maleficus, I am so sorry…"

"Sarratum, you made me happy, you be happy now."

She could feel his heart beat one final time within his thin body, could hear that last breath rumble from his lungs before passing his lips in a soft sigh.

"Noo, no, no, no, stay with me, PLEASE!"

The protection barrier surrounding her shattered as soon as the life within him extinguished, revealing them to sight as she rocked Maleficus's lifeless body. Ignoring the death god she continued to gently run her fingers through his wild curls, her lips pressing a kiss upon his cold forehead before pulling away with a broken sob.

"You had no right, he was just a boy."

"Don't think to place the blame of this child's premature death on me, priestess. I warned you there would be consequences to your obstinacy, it's you who repeatedly chose to ignore my warning."

Every word was filled with malice as he spoke. "I won't be satisfied until I've seen you destroyed, Amara. Keep your precious soul for now,

and watch as I first claim your would-be heir, and then come for your would-be King."

"Stay away from him."

Her warning was met with laughter, the sound she was sure to remember for centuries to come.

When those bony fingers reached out to Maleficus again, she swiped at him. The sharp blade of her athame striking rotted skin and bare bone but leaving no damage — proof that one simply couldn't hurt death.

At his touch, a bright light began to slowly rise from the boy's lifeless body. His soul. The shine brighter than any other she'd seen before. His energy radiated with the pureness that which from childlike innocence.

"Please don't do this, if you send his soul into the afterlife—you won't be killing him, you'll destroy him."

"Not me, priestess, you did this."

"PLEASE, NOOO!" The words were torn from her soul.

A deafening thunderclap answered her cry high in the sky above. Her scream had been filled with agony and despair, a wordless prayer to any deity who would intervene for Maleficus' sake. Whatever price was demanded of her, she would pay it to spare him.

But none of the dark deities she so loyally served came to answer her plea. And why would they? She had nothing to barter with that held interest at that moment.

None of the mighty deities would offer to challenge the death god on her behalf. But someone had listened, and to her astonishment, it was not the darkness she served which answered her desperate call.

The bright flash of lighting that cut through the dark sky above revealed two winged warriors descending from the heavens. Celestials, soldiers of the light approached with fiery swords drawn. And for once, it wasn't her the angels were targeting — the tips of their holy swords were aimed at the death god himself.

"We've heard your call, priestess, and have come to claim the child."

63

WHO'S HOLY NOW?

HER SIGIL BURNED THROUGH HIS CHEST, AMARA'S AGONY SCREAMING through him. She wasn't in her rooms. He was near to panic, no one could tell him where she was, she hadn't been seen in the temple. They were hiding her, and she was *hurt*.

He stopped for a moment and took a steadying breath.

Her cottage. That's the only other place she'd logically be. Hiding from him, running from her secrets.

Regardless of their past, he was sworn to protect her *now*.

He ran through the temple to the main portal, didn't stop running until her home was in sight.

Something was off. The house was obscured by a glamour designed to trick the eye into turning from it. But there was an energy that didn't belong, it was opposite of his own and therefore harmful to her.

Celestials…

He ran faster, the burn of her sigil upon his chest beginning to spread through his bones. Never before had her mark responded in such a way, and a part of him feared what he would find. What if he was too late?

It made no sense, why would Celestials attack her? Sure, they weren't considered righteous beings, but he and his Priestess were needed, helped keep the balance within the realms in check. Without darkness there would be no light, good wouldn't exist without evil. They were necessary placeholders.

He pulled his sword from its sheath without breaking his stride.

“Mara!” he shouted across the lawns.

No response. Just the constant drone of celestial power throbbing through his bones, making his jaw ache. Sudden movement from his left flank froze him in place, the obsidian edge of his blade shining in Gaia’s blinding light, ready to face his would-be challenger.

The angel that walked out from the tree-line was stunning. Golden hair twisted up into ravels down each side of her head, hanging to hips which were barely covered by a tiny plate mail skirt. Her snow white wings were tipped with gold-gilded feathers, her raised sword flaming with holy fire, proclaiming her to be a warrior from the Heavens.

“Back off demon scum, this is not your concern.”

The beautiful warrior came to stand between him and the path leading up to the cottage, blocking him as swung out. He had barely sufficient time to parry the blow as his blade clashed against hers, the sound reverberating through the forests.

“What’ve you done to her?” he snarled back, shifting so his blade slid up the length of hers.

A startled expression flitted across her face, settling into confusion.

“We haven’t done a thing. We answered a cry for help.”

“Let me past.”

“No”

He growled low, his blade held to hers. “You don’t want to press this issue sweetheart.”

She spun, bringing her blade down across his, strain twisting her unearthly features as she countered him with all the force her slight body could put behind it.

“It’s you who should watch yourself, demon.” She bared her teeth and parried his thrust. “I am a warrior and executioner. You. Will. Not. Get past me.”

Cass scoffed and held his blade against hers, looking her up and down. Anger burned in his chest, overtaking the panic.

“A warrior? Dressed in a skirt that barely covers your ass?” Sweat was beading on his brow from the heat of the divine flame, but he still managed a cocky smirk.

Power throbbed through the air, more than merely Celestial. Mara was trapped… alone.

“No mortal can bear witness to me in this form,” she hissed back, a fine sheen of sweat beading up on her own face.

“Ah, but I can.” He flicked his tongue against his pointy canine and looked down to where her skirt was barely covering the tops of her thighs. “I can see plenty.”

She huffed out a breath and staggered back, giving him a look full of such contempt that he worried for his soul. Or, would if her judgment was any of his concern.

“You dare to remark upon my appearance, demon filth?” She sneered, raising her sword again, then tilting her head and taking a moment to study him. “You’re flirting with me?”

He laughed, flicking his sword up to hers once more. “Why would a filthy demon flirt with such a good little girl?” Their swords clashed again.

“Let me by so I can get to my Priestess,” he said, stepping back to get more leverage.

“Priestess?” Her eyes narrowed for a moment, then her brows raised. “You mean the Warlock Queen. I told Sid it was unwise to become involved.” The tips of their swords met, casually, both caught up in thought more than action.

“Sid?” Cass’s grip faltered, his thoughts going back to meeting Jez. “I know him. Allow me to pass and speak with him.” He held his blade against hers to keep it still.

She snorted lightly. “How would *you* know Sid?”

“I helped his friend.” Cass snapped his blade against hers in warning. “Not that it’s any of your concern. Let me past. If I find her hurt, and you stopped me from getting to her...”

“What friend?” she said, her face paling. “Oh no.” She shifted her grip on her sword and slammed it down hard. “You’re the one who took my brother. You’re the Demon King.”

Pain tore through his chest, making breathing impossible. Mara. She was hurt.

“Fucking move,” he said, growling as he tried to side-step her.

“Tell me of my brother, first,” she snarled and parried back.

Jez has a sister. How had he not known?

She wasn’t letting him past, he really didn’t want to hurt her—had to get past. His sigil burned his chest… she was in agony…

“He’s safe.” Cass pivoted on one foot and brought his sword down hard, her arms shaking with the effort it took to hold him off. “In my bed,” Cass growled out.

With an indignant screech, she spun, and to Cass’s misfortune, his eyes were riveted to the flash of her ass that was bared. Long enough that she managed to strike the sword from his hand.

By all the bloody hells. He was getting his ass handed to him by Princess Angel Barbie. She lifted that sword over her head with both hands, the flame growing, her eyes determined, and he had no choice.

He had to get her out of the way. “Mara...”

Judging by the pain burning through his chest, she could be dying.

He grasped a handful of the fine chainmail covering her breasts, and dragged her forward, planting his lips on hers with a rough kiss.

He felt the blade sweep down to her side, the puff of her breath on his lips, and the nearly silent sound in her throat. Her eyes were wide, looking directly into his—then they traveled down to his mouth, and her pink little tongue dragged out between her lips and her fate was sealed.

His free hand cupped the back of her head and his mouth met hers once more, his tongue delving in, tasting the heat of her, the resistance of her own tongue.

Pain seared through his chest, bringing him back to his senses. He staggered back a step, and Angel Barbie pressed her fingers to her lips, staring at him in stunned silence.

“Move…” The word came out as a whisper, blood pooling in his mouth.

“You kissed me?” she whispered.

He looked down to see her sword planted in his chest, her eyes widening as they followed.

“Yeah well, you stabbed me.” He dropped to his knees and the sword slid out, the Holy Flames doused and burning out with the coating of his infernal blood. “We’ll call it even for now.”

There was nothing. He couldn’t feel Mara anymore, nothing but the Holy Flames incinerating his insides.

She was gone? He hadn’t even been able to cut down one celestial in order to get to her. *Pathetic*. His father was right. Unworthy in every way.

She dropped to her knees beside him.

“On my grace, are you okay?” Her panicked hands pressed over his wound, staunching what little blood flow that wasn’t cauterized.

He laughed. He couldn’t help but be amused, even with as much pain as he was in.

“Wasn’t that the point, love?” he purred out with a rasp, “End it.” He held his arms to the side. “Do it now.”

His head hung. No longer amused with anything, just… tired. So tired of fighting. If she was gone, he had nothing to fight for. His realms were better off without him. *Not fit to rule.* Not fit to live. *All the promises he’d ever made were worthless.*

“Why did you kiss me?” she whispered, tears sparkling on her cheeks.

He snorted. “Prince of Lust.” He eased down onto the grass and lay back. “Why won’t you end this? It’s what you intended to do, yes?” His voice was thin, his breathing ragged.

“I’ve never actually killed.” She let out a small huff, her cheeks flushing. “I don’t think you’re as bad as they say.” Her hands warmed on his chest, the purity in her soul momentarily sating the hunger in his.

His eyes were closed, he smiled anyway. “Darling, I’m worse.”

Her body went tense beside him, he could feel it in the shift of the air. “They’re leaving. Please, tell Jez’Piel I...miss him.”

Then she was gone.

And he could feel Mara again, a dull throb aching from the sigil and radiating through his chest, mingling with the pain of the Holy Flames burning through his blood. She was alive, and he was nearly done for.

He was laughing to himself as he was hauled to his feet. The fates were cruel.

“Is he maddened?” A voice asked, recognition flirting on the outsides of his conscious thoughts.

“He’s injured. No time for questions, just grab his sword.” Levistus spoke back.

“Of all the idiotic, reckless things…” Levistus was mumbling under his breath.

“Mara.” He tried to break free of their hold. “Let me go, she’s hurt. She’s HURTING LET ME GO.”

“You’ve been seared with Holy Flames and if we don’t get you tended to, your hurting will be at an end,” Levistus hissed in his ear, “because you’ll be dead.”

64

WHAT KIND OF MONSTER

AWARENESS RETURNED SLOWLY BENEATH THE UNFORGIVING SPRAY OF ICY water. Her teeth were chattering, her hands shaking, her skin pruned, her mind numb.

Maleficus…

The wound of loss it wasn't even skin deep, it didn't leave a bleeding gash one could bind. Instead, it burrowed within bone and sinew, settling deep inside where it would fester, become part of her. The darkness within feeding on it, the stain on her soul expanding. If it had made her a monster before…

What will I become now?

Her fingers closed around the neck of a shampoo bottle, sending it hurtling through the air to connect with the large vanity mirror above the sink, shattering it to pieces. *Seven years bad luck.*

The thought made her laugh, the sound distorted and cold. That just made her laugh harder, becoming hysterical as breathless laughter turned to mindless screams.

"DAMN YOU!"

She had believed her tears had run dry after losing her heart, her demon. For even when Namtar had claimed the lives of her sisters she hadn't spilled a single tear. This time was different. Hidden away beneath the spray of cold water, she cried.

She wept for the boy, for her father, for her sisters, for her Cassius. And lastly, for herself. The screams continued until her throat was raw, and

the tears again refused to fall. Anger had long turned into exhaustion before she finally shut off the water and stepped out of the shower stall.

Her palm ached, the sin-eater's sigil burning against her skin. Nothing urgent. Dravite would protect the demon from immediate danger, and Agate knew where she had run off to. They would come to inform her if there was trouble.

The death god wanted to make a statement with his latest victory, and he'd succeeded. Not only had he demonstrated that she wasn't powerful enough to defeat him, but also that she was pathetically incapable of protecting the few whom she treasured.

He'd come to confirm her greatest fear, that despite the sacrifice she made during Ostara by walking away from the sin-eater, Namtar had still set his sights on him. Death was coming for the demon.

Rendered impervious to the curse by not possessing a soul, she had foolishly thought the King of Hell beyond his reach. The sin-eater was powerful, but not undying, and between the two of them, they had accumulated an impressive number of enemies.

"And in my arrogance, I added the Death God to that list."

After wrapping herself in an oversize towel she shuffled her way toward the connecting bedroom, following the trail of discarded clothing items. She must've removed them during her mindless journey towards the shower.

Atop the leather jacket lay a feather of purest white with a gilded tip. "Celestials..."

The warrior angel who announced himself simply as Sid had placed himself between her and Namtar, his holy sword raised in challenge against the Sumerian death god. Namtar had been furious when the celestial laid claim to the boy's soul, declaring that despite his birth his spirit belonged to the Heavens, where it would be treasured and guarded.

She'd never heard of such an intervention taking place before, it was an acknowledged fact that Hell fed on the innocent, and the Heavens grew powerful from slaying the wicked. The Celestial had made an exception, even though she failed to understand the reason for it. Likely a demand would follow, there was always a price to pay. Or perhaps this had something to do with the newly appointed Herald of the Hells?

While lost to her musings, Amara's fingers brushed along the spine of the pretty feather, before catching sight of the small, crumpled piece of

paper hidden beneath it. Maleficus had pressed that piece of paper into her hand as he lay dying in her arms, determined she'd take it from him.

I told you I'd make it right…

With an unsteady grip, she reached for the scrap of paper, unfolding it carefully. A small entry had been copied upon it from one of the books she had gifted him.

"A spirit crystal?"

Depending on the type of crystal, certain energies could be conducted, amplified or trapped within, which was the very reason the nine great temples of Asurim and the Inner Sanctum had been carved from them.

According to legend, spirit crystals were among the most dangerous crystals found within the realms. It trapped energy, life's energy — earning them the nickname of soul snatchers. The crystals were rumored to be so beautiful to behold that many tended to forget their hideous nature. The crystal would bestow its owner with complete control over the person whose soul was trapped within.

She'd never seen a spirit crystal before, so she couldn't attest to the tales of their beauty, but their effectiveness was beyond doubt.

Millennia ago, the Dark Fae and the Dragons had warred over which race would lay claim to the realm of Gaia. Gwynn's father had used spirit crystals to enslave many of the dragon kind, their spirits forever trapped within stone. Those he controlled were set against their own kind, very few dragons survived, and the Fae conquered Gaia.

Next, they created the ley-lines to siphon away the magick of Gaia, hoarding it for themselves, and from it, they created Tír na nÓg, the realm of the Fae folk.

None of it explained why her clever ward had fixated on this particular crystal. The gods possessed no souls to snatch, it's what made them especially vulnerable to the fade for they lacked it's anchoring. It had been the reason Namtar had entered a bargain with her mother. The divine power of a god would overwhelm a soul, but hers was linked to the Ether, the soul of a high priestess could withstand the merging. Her power would become his. Namtar would forever be safe from the fade while retaining his godhood because he would possess a soul.

He WOULD have a soul...

It meant that the crystal would have something to snatch. The idea was ludicrous and had little chance of success. But it could give them leverage,

it could save the sin-eater.

“Maleficus, you clever boy.”

With renewed determination she hurried for the dresser, pulling a simple black dress embroidered with purple runes over wet hair and damp skin. A quick swipe of her athame across her palm reopened the already closed cut, her blood and her magick summoning open a temporary portal in a circle at her feet.

As soon as she stepped foot back into Asurim, energy suffused her. This was her home, her heritage, part of her own essence infused into the realm. Magick rose within her, and with it came a jolt of agonizing pain. It seared her palm as if burned by Hexafire.

“Cassius!”

Instinct had her turn for the permanent portal leading to the Nessus, when Levistus himself came to stand before her, blocking her passage.

“What’s happened to him?”

“The King was struck down by a celestial blade. Dominus Oberith has most generously sent Rasputin ahead to the Nessus to care for him. Cassius is much weakened, but he’ll live.”

“A celestial blade?”

Had he come looking for her on Gaia? The urgency she felt didn’t lessen. She needed to see him, learn for herself about his condition and healing.

“Don’t even think about it priestess…”

“Try and stop me old goat.”

She had already made three steps forward before his voice caught up to her. “What if the Celestials hadn’t intervened, what if Cassius had successfully made his way to you? It would’ve placed him face to face with your god. Stop acting on impulse and think! The boy was merely a ploy to lure Cassius out, and it nearly worked. Stay away from him.”

Between clenched teeth she snarled. “Did you find what you were looking for in my chambers last night?”

The infuriating demon prince merely shrugged, “No. Why didn’t you tell me that the binding you two entered made you aware when the other is in distress?”

“Right, my mistake. Let’s set a date for matching manicures and hair braiding and I’ll tell you all about it… fuck off Levistus.”

With a final glare, she spun on her heel and turned her back to the demon prince, feeling much too raw from the events in recent hours to properly deal with him.

When she finally reached her chambers, she barked orders at the stationed guards to have the mad monk report to her as soon as he returned from caring for Cassius. The urge to join him was nearly too powerful to repress.

First I take your would-be heir, and next, I'll claim your would-be king.

As much as she wanted to—she had to stay away, would not endanger the sin-eater any further with her foolish actions. Coming to stand before the reorganized bookshelves she selected several volumes and climbed into the comfort of her bed.

As she opened the first tome, she noted her hands hadn't stopped shaking, adrenaline and emotions she didn't dare inspect too closely running in the background. She hadn't lost her family, her husband, or the boy… that was someone else, not her. She was okay.

Another life, a different girl, a different demon...

With a forlorn sigh, she pulled the silks and furs closely around her, closing off as she set to diligently scour the pages for anything she could learn on the manipulation of spirit crystals.

65

DEVIL OF A DEAL

MEPHISTOPHELES, THE PRINCE OF CONTRACTS, LOOKED DAPPER IN A tailor-fitted suit, its mauve coloring accenting his golden skin and dazzlingly blue eyes. The demon looked positively gleeful as he walked into the main hall of the Nessus, which for once was blissfully devoid of courtiers and audience.

Cassius sent word to Mephistopheles less than an hour previous, the demon was prompt. He'd rather been hoping the last minute invitation would've been declined because then he wouldn't need to enter Asurim.

"It's business. Strictly business."

He and the Priestess had been working together for over a century, he could keep this professional.

No one would tell him what happened to her with the Celestials; when the burn in his chest finally eased, he'd simply stopped asking. She clearly didn't care, neither should he. Amara had sent her personal poisons master to tend to him, so she must've known how close he'd come to meeting his own demise. The notion hadn't bothered her enough to come to him herself.

Dravite walked beside Jez, her arm linked through his, whispering between the two of them, too quiet for Cass to make out their words. It mattered not, his attention was elsewhere. More and more he found himself retreating into his own mind, finding odd pieces to a puzzle but failing to see where they fit. Where had it all gone so wrong? More accurately, what had changed? The only thing he was certain of was that

something had changed, and he was changing with it. When had it started, and where would it end?

The sword is a harbinger of sorts...

At the sound of a deep, boisterous laugh his head snapped up just in time to see Levistus throw back his head, laughing at something Mephistopheles said. It struck Cass that the two of them had probably known one another for a very long time.

One of these days he needed to sit Levistus down and ask for charts and diagrams of all the political connections that he'd missed or not paid proper attention to during his father's rule. He was learning the demonarchy was a treacherous hierarchy with plenty of pitfalls, his Priestess accurate in her assessment that his home in the Nessus was a viper's nest.

Jez's hand stopped him. "You're okay with this?"

Cass gave him a curt nod. "It's business Jez. Strictly business."

She'd made that clear when she chose the Huntsman over him, her continued absence driving the point home.

Jez gave him a look full of doubt, releasing his arm with a sad shake of the head.

"Let's be off then."

Mephistopheles and Levistus stepped forward at his command, flanking his side as he proceeded to open a gate directly into the warlock realm. Asurim was an extension of her, just like the Hells were part of him, and he was oddly relieved to find the energy greeted him on the other side to be welcoming and familiar.

"Hell-gate, hey?" Mephistopheles arched a brow. "Handy trick."

Cass pursed his lips, not wanting to comment. He had no idea where the ability had come from, he'd thought it a standard ability for the Archdeacons.

"...powers other than his father," Levistus was saying, as he and the other demon walked through.

Cass waited for Jez and Dravite to go ahead of him, hesitating halfway through. He took a steadying breath, centering himself. He could do this. This was all he needed from her. Business. That was all.

The smell within the ninth temple carried strong notes of astringent and opium, an unsuccessful attempt to cover the lingering scent of freshly spilled blood. His priestess had been busy.

The few worshipers and acolytes in attendance dropped to their knee, their heads lowered in a display of what could be respect or fear. Although he didn't bend a knee, his feet did stop moving when he saw her enter the hall. His heart pounded in his chest, and yes, one look and he was rock hard.

She was focused on her hands, picking at dainty crimson painted claws, looking everywhere but at him. The air felt thick with energy which rose whenever she was within his proximity. Could she feel his presence as strongly as he felt hers?

His entourage for the occasion surrounded him, their expressions expectant, and it took him a moment to realize they were waiting for him to lead the way. He swallowed down the emotion that was threatening to choke him, straightened his shoulders and walked swiftly up to her.

Her throne sat atop a small mound of skulls, the sightless eyes of those who had wronged her gouged out and replaced with glimmering emeralds. The familiar onyx staircase which led up to the sacrificial altar served as the backdrop to her seat, its steep steps adorned with hundreds of burning candles rather than the usual writhing bodies or streams of blood. A temple of pain and pleasure. His shrine, his altar, and his priestess.

Her eyes flashed with something when they finally met his. Her body went still, her expression cold.

So that's how it was going to be?

He threw his shoulders back, nostrils flaring.

"Mara," he stopped when he was within hearing distance.

Her eyes closed briefly, then her gaze went over his shoulder, grew hostile, and she went back to ignoring him.

Dravite walked in front of him, dropping to a knee, bowing deeply.

"My condolences, Sarratum-sa, I share your grief in the loss of the boy," Dravite said, her head lowered. "I would like to make an offering, while I'm here."

Cass's eyes jumped to Amara's. She wasn't looking at him, so focused on anything but him that it was tangible. What boy? She'd lost someone and hadn't thought to tell him. Why had he even bothered to hope there was anything more between them? She didn't care. He needed to stop believing otherwise.

Cass turned to gesture from Mephistopheles back to Amara, retreating back into the role of King.

“Mephistopheles, my Priestess, Amara; Sarratum regent of Asurim, High Priestess to the deities of old.”

He turned back to Amara, who was now fully focused on him. “This is Mephistopheles, Prince of Contracts, Lord of the Eighth, King of the Crossroads, Merchant of Souls.”

Amara’s brows rose, probably at Cass’s formality. So many titles.

“If there’s naught else you need?” Cassius swept into a bow and nodded to Mephistopheles.

“My thanks, for the introduction King Cassius.” While he distinctly recognized the edge in her voice, it was likely no one else would’ve picked up on it. He couldn’t stay here. Not with those cerulean eyes full of indifference.

“I’ll be on my way then.” Cass backed up a step, pausing as Mephistopheles placed his hand on his arm.

“We will have tea,” Mephistopheles said to Amara, holding Cass tight. “The King will sit and talk while we get to know one another, then I’ll divulge my business.”

Amara visibly bristled at the demon’s impertinent tone. Or was it the fact that she would be required to endure their visit sitting and taking tea with him? That thought aggrieved him more than he anticipated. He owned her loyalty but had only recently managed to lay claim to her friendship. Had he already lost it?

“General Dravite you’re excused, on your feet and go see to your sister. Er-Agate has been most eager to see you.” The near inconspicuous smile at the corner of her lips belied the sternness in her voice as Amara addressed her General. “I fear I shall be denied any measure of peace until she has been able to determine your well-being for herself.”

She approached, closing the last few steps between them, his eyes glued to her every movement. For the occasion, her dark ceremonial robes had been replaced by burgundy silk, the fabric bound together by golden chains at her shoulders and waist before pooling at her feet, clinging to her body with each movement she made. If he was sin, then she was his seduction.

Amara stopped when there was no more than one step separating them, as though expecting him to move out of her way. He didn’t.

At his challenge, her expression turned mulish, her bottom lip catching between her teeth as she dared that final step, still he refused to move.

His gaze snagged on the plumpness of her lip, highlighted by her teeth pressing into it. When her tongue darted out to soothe it, he lost his breath. He licked his own lips in response, looking her over, ensuring the crazy part of his brain that hadn't let go of the idea she'd been harmed that she was, in fact, whole and hearty.

She was trembling faintly though, and instead of her usual obstinate arms crossed stance, her hands twisted together, stained the color of charcoal by whatever dye she dabbled in—leaving the impression that she had once held live fire and her hands were no more than the charred remains.

Their eyes finally met when her bared feet brushed against his leather-clad ones. They were close enough to breathe the same breaths, the proximity sending an assault of sensations exploding through his chest with all the gentleness of a shock wave. He wasn't the only one, he saw her pupils dilate, heard her breath catch. And the front she'd been holding fell to where he could finally reach her.

"You're fully healed? I was informed you were injured by holy flames," she whispered.

She looked so tired. Sad and tired. Whatever happened on Gaia had left its mark on her.

"I tried to get to you. Mara." He edged a bit closer. "I felt your pain. The boy…?"

Her mouth flattened, her expression again closed off.

With a sigh, he tried a different tactic. "Thank you for sending Rasputin." Anything to get her to talk to him. Hells but this hurt.

"How are your potions holding up?" she asked, a touch breathless.

He couldn't catch his breath. His body burned. Fucking *ached* for her.

"Gone." His voice cracked.

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Cass, that supply was supposed to last you through the month..."

She stepped closer, her gaze searching him as if she were drawing every inch of him into her memory. The heat of her body radiated to his, wordlessly calling to him, with him instinctively reaching for it. Never before had he felt such a pull of energy, and he knew she felt it too.

"What are you doing to yourself, demon?"

He inched closer, their chests nearly touching, in fact, if she breathed deep enough her nipples would rub against him. And his damned erection

was nearly brushing against her.

How was he surviving without her? She was like fucking air.

“I could ask you the same.” His hand came up to reach for her cheek, paused and dropped back to his side.

Her hand came up, he watched it all the way to his face, his breath held the entire time, his body electrified as their skin made contact. She tucked his hair behind his ear with a soft smile on her lips.

“Protecting you…”

My Mara...

Someone cleared their throat, breaking their trance.

Positively fucking *burned.*

“Tea then?” Mephistopheles’s too-jovial tone irritated.

“Tea.” Cass nodded, taking one last deep breath, memorizing her scent. Dark magicks, herbs and an underlying mouth-watering hint of winter berries.

Cass stood frozen as the rest made their way after Amara until Jez’s hand went to his back to nudge him along.

Amara peeked back over her shoulder at him, and Cass unabashedly adjusted himself, smiling when her step hitched and threw off her stride.

Nope, she most definitely hadn’t been as unaffected as she let on.

The silence was grueling as they all sipped their tea. Dravite was standing off to the side, the female beside her unmistakably her sister. And although they spoke, he noted how Dravite’s eyes kept returning to Jez, gazing at him with longing, before looking back with pride at the female who Amara had referred to as Agate. A name he made sure to remember, his Priestess held secrets, and Agate was sure to be privy to some.

His gaze finally returned to lock with hers, feeling oddly comforted by the fact she looked wired—about as keyed up as he was feeling.

“You may be curious as to why I asked this meeting to be arranged, Priestess.” Mephistopheles finally said.

Cass sure as hell was.

“He wants an introduction to one of yours, Mara,” Cass said with an assured nod.

Mephistopheles raised a brow at him, smiling a devious grin and his stomach sunk. Had he been played?

“I’m tracking down a contract. One made many years past. As per my side of the arrangement, I see that she’s made it into the upper echelons of

your society. But I've come for my due. I'm owed." Mephistopheles was no longer playful, his intent now deadly serious.

In the distance, he could hear dishes clattered to the floor, but all attention was on Amara as she straightened in her seat.

"If she is one of mine, she has my protection."

Mephistopheles whipped out a scroll, unrolling it with the same dramatic flourish he applied to everything.

"It's my understanding that Agate, Priestess of the Esoteric, serves here as a royal attendant in this very temple?"

Dravite groaned low, her hands clasped to her mouth. While on the other side of the room her sister had turned pale as a sheet. Amara shot them both a look of warning and she turned away.

"She does," Amara said, looking to Cass.

Did she expect him to intervene? Even as sovereign he couldn't step between the Prince of Contracts and his due. But for her, he would try.

He cleared his throat. "Is there not some arrangement that can be made?"

He gave Amara a quick look, hoping that was what she had been seeking, feeling satisfied when she visibly relaxed.

"I've given her the promised years, now her servitude belongs to me. At the very least, she should be at worship in my temple, she moved onward and upward; and the moment she diverted her worship from me," he looked over to Cass, "to the King himself, the conditions of her contract were in violation. I've left her alone for some time, but I grow bored of waiting."

Amara bared her teeth and Cass grabbed her hand.

Amara shook off Cass's hand. "I'll have her ready for departure. Harm her Mephistopheles, and I'll show you a new place to shove your contracts."

Loss and anger blazed within her gaze, the sight of it urging him to intervene as she rose to leave.

"Mara, wait." He followed her through the doorway and into the hall reaching for her arm, with her evading his grasp, whipping around to face him instead.

"You brought this to my doorstep." Her eyes lit up, anger making her cheeks flush. "She's one of mine, one of the few I can trust," she snarled.

“I didn’t know. I thought he had… other interests.” Cass finally caught up her hand, dragging her back to him. His hand trailed from her hand up her arm, settling on her rib cage.

“I need allies, but it wasn’t meant to be at your expense.”

“Manipulations will not be tolerated. I won’t be yours or anyone’s puppet to use—not anymore.” The heat was gone from her tone, her body becoming pliant in his grip.

His hand moved down to her waist, thumb dragging back and forth, fingers testing the resilience of her flesh.

Was there anything he’d ever craved more than this?

“Never. I’m yours too.” He leaned in slowly, waiting for her to discourage this, his other hand going to her waist to pull her in. Her hips to his, his erection throbbing painfully as it pressed against her stomach.

His lips met hers, softly molding to her pliant mouth, his knees nearly giving out at the rightness. The taste of her was a benediction, a sacrament to soothe some wound in his soul that cried out for her.

She whimpered, her hands grasping at his hair, pulling him down hard, their tongues meeting with frantic need as they devoured each other. Losing themselves in each other. He was hers. More than just the binding deal they had made to one another. Surely she could feel how right this was?

He groaned, the sound torn from deep in his chest. His hands tightened, dragging her hips hard to his.

For a moment, she gave in to him completely, her body melting into his.

Then her entire body stiffened, and her heel came down on his foot.

“Then fix this! Dammit demon. Stop.” She pushed him away and his chest heaved.

Denying him when he craved her so entirely he wanted nothing but to crawl inside of her skin. Perhaps she knew him too well. Knew how utterly irredeemable he was.

He hung his head, turning away from her, not wanting her to see how badly her rejection hurt. Again. Her breath hissed in and his stomach sunk. She’d felt it anyway—his hurt that was an actual physical ache.

“All right. I’ll do what I can.” He walked away without looking back.

“I’ll send you home with more potions.” She called after him.

He did look back, letting her see all the hurt that was eating him up. “Yes Mara.”

She flinched. He swallowed hard and steeled himself against it.

“Cass…” She whispered with longing.

He kept walking.

LEVISTUS AND MEPHISTOPHELES WERE LAUGHING, Jez held a fuming Dravite on his lap, clearly trying to reassure her. The entire atmosphere such a drastic contrast to what he was feeling — he needed out of it.

“Wrap this up.” Cass crossed his arms and stood there glaring at the lot of them. “You can retrieve Agate another time, my Priestess needs her at present.”

“Cassius.” Levistus’s tone warned.

“No. She needs her guards and attendants where they are. I can’t be here to watch over things. I have my own shit piling up what with Glasya and her arrogance.”

“Yet you still want my armies.” Mephistopheles’s brows raised.

“They are mine,” Cass roared. “Every fucking thing in those realms is ultimately under my rule!”

Mephistopheles leaned back in his chair, a slow smile spreading across his face. Then he clapped.

“Well done,” he chuckled. “We’ll make a King out of you yet.”

Cass’s mouth opened, then closed.

“Allow me to give the Priestess my regards, and we can be on our way,” Mephistopheles said, standing gracefully and placing his hat back on his head. “Through one of your gates. That you can make with no more than a thought.”

Cass still hadn’t closed his mouth as the demon shut the door behind him, wandering off after Amara.

His anger grew with each moment the demon didn’t return.

Minutes dragged by as his Priestess traded secrets with Mephistopheles, his rage a burning entity sucking all the air out of the room, leaving everyone shifting in uncomfortable silence.

Was he to just accept that he’d forever be in the dark?

66

BAITED HOOK

No others followed into the antechamber, which meant the Demon Prince had left the sin-eater and the rest of his entourage to wait on him. A swift reminder who she was dealing with, for only Mephistopheles would dare something so outrageous as to make the King of Hell wait on him. As soon as the heavy door closed behind her, Amara turned on him.

“Don’t insult my intelligence Lucifer, if your intention had simply been to claim rights on a contract, then you had no need for introductions. Care to explain why you dragged a reluctant sin-eater along for a tea party?”

Games and strategy, secrets and traps, she was growing so very weary of it all.

“Why do I ever do anything, priestess? I grew curious. So much gossip has been reaching my ears, and you know how I adore good gossip.”

“Indeed. And has your curiosity been satisfied?”

He inclined his head to her, his dazzling smile in place “Some, but not all...”

She recognized the opening to negotiations; he was offering a bargain. It was a wild guess at what caught the interest of the Prince, but she would do whatever lay in her power to secure her attendant’s soul before this meeting’s end. Despite her own difficult nature, Agate and Dravite had shown her only loyalty. That was worth something.

“I’m in no mood for games Lucifer, you’ve successfully laid out your bait. I’ll bite. What do you seek in exchange for Agate’s contract?”

Recalling the promise to replenish Cassius's poisons, she moved for a long row of apothecary cabinets lining the walls, then grimaced. The supplies kept within were intended to 'enhance' the libations of guests should the need arise. Truth serums, paralyzers, and poisons of various degrees were stored here, but it lacked any of the personalized concoctions she usually supplied the sin-eater with.

Most would consider her cruel for enabling the sin-eater's addiction to poison, encouraging his dependency on pain and longing for oblivion. Let them judge, it was to her benefit. The years had made her an expert in hiding any form of kindness behind a thick veneer of cruelty and carelessness.

Studying under En-Rasputin she had discovered that difference between a cure and a poison was in the applied dosage, and in that Amara was meticulous. She couldn't heal the damage done to the demon all those years ago, but with her poisons at least she could help ease the symptoms.

Aza's clear blue eyes nearly glowed. "He's too young."

He bit his lip to hold back whatever he had nearly blurted out; her stomach sank anyway. She wasn't a fool and knew what this meant, permanent damage had been done. Cassius's body not yet fully grown, his powers not yet developed. Like her, he'd not yet reached immortality, which left him vulnerable.

"Cass," she cried out, fear for him growing with each passing moment.

With slow jerky movements, he made his way back to her bars, slipping his hand through, his fingers brushing against her arm.

"I'll be fine, arramu-sa."

"Princess, he needs to be seen right away before this becomes permanent."

She bared her teeth at him—Aza knew she hated when he called her that... but he wasn't paying any attention. Instead, their guardian was holding his fingers in front of Cass's face moving slowly to one side then the other, Cass following with his eyes. One pupil was dilated, turning his right eye fully black.

She tugged on his hand to get his attention back. "Cass? You can see me, right?"

"Course I can." He turned to her fully, pressing indents in his cheek from the bars. "I can look at you forever."

She watched Aza out of the corner of her eye, saw him move behind Cass, waving his hand quickly towards her demon as though he were to strike him. She flinched, Cass didn't.

"NO GAMES PRIESTESS."

Lucifer's voice pulled her from the grip of memories, startling her when she found the demon prince standing directly behind her. She hadn't even noticed him move. Evidence to the fact she was slipping.

"Why do you defy him? He's your king, you underestimate him at your own peril."

Something dark and menacing crossed his gaze. "It's because I do not underestimate him that I challenge—my perceived obstinacy is the action of an ally, not an enemy. It's time Cassius grew aware of the power he wields, that he fully accepts his nature and his role. I know you share this opinion, Priestess, so I've come to offer my assistance."

A smile curled her lips, the gesture lacking any humor. "Thank you, but I must decline. You've spent millennia in loyal servitude to Asmodeus, why would in the hells would I place you in any position of confidence?"

She dismissed him by turning her back and reaching for the top shelf of the cabinet, reaching for a small box of assorted poisons. Yet before she could lay claim to it, Lucifer effortlessly plucked the case from its resting spot, holding it out of her reach.

The moment she turned to face him she found herself placed eye to eye with the Demon Prince just as he released his powerful glamour, revealing the beastly form hidden beneath the handsome façade.

Fear would've been the natural response when confronted with the true form of the ruler of the eighth, but the impact was lost on her. Amara simply didn't fear the grotesque or frightening, had survived horrors inflicted by those who wore the faces of angels, to her, beauty was far more frightening.

The atmosphere within the antechamber grew oppressive with his power, the hint of aggression it carried causing her own magick to rise at the threat.

"Did I strike a nerve, Prince of Contracts? Good. Then you understand why I consider your offer an insult. As far as I'm concerned you're equally to blame for what became of my Cassius. Now hand over the box."

He stared at her a long moment, then that dazzling smile returned its humor causing those tendrils of black forking through his eyes to fade back to startling azure.

“You have a talent for holding grudges, Priestess.”

She held out her hand in agitation, fully expecting him to return her property. “You think so? I don’t believe stating a fact qualifies as holding a grudge. He was your prince to protect, and you along with all the archdeacons failed him”

He dangled the case in front of her. “Have you considered that perhaps I came here today seeking penance?”

“No.” She shrugged. “Besides, what was done can’t be undone, you more than anyone should know this.”

“I failed to protect Cassius then, I don’t plan on repeating that mistake.” He pulled the box even further out of her reach. “Speaking of grudges, it would appear that your refusal of the Sumerian death god has made my king a target. This is a problem, Namtar is a vicious enemy to have.”

Shock caused the already offending offering of the tea to turn sour in her stomach.

“How do you know this?”

“Good gossip. If you don’t trust my desire to make amends, then trust my wish for survival. We both stand to lose much should Cassius be overthrown and Glasya or Asmodeus rise to claim the throne.”

Her fingers pinched the bridge of her nose, knowing she was playing directly into his hand. But she needed Agate’s contract, and the sin-eater needed allies.

“What is it you’re asking of me Mephistopheles?”

“Through the century you’ve kept your secrets close, Priestess. It makes me uneasy when your scheming influences the future of my realm.”

“You mean Cassius’s realm, of course.”

He inclined his head in response. “It will be, one day soon. However, his refusal to take on the duties of his title when taking the throne has left the realm divided.”

“So your wish is to be in my confidence, to discover what gossip I hold secret. Is that it?”

“Of sorts. I need to know about everything concerning the death god, about the sword you retrieved from Ghata’n, and whatever else I may find

relevant in keeping Hell and its King secure. In return, I am prepared to surrender my claim on your Agate. A most extraordinary concession on my part, I do not relinquish property easily."

She tilted her head. "Since you've brought it up, why is everyone so bloody fixated on that useless sword, anyway? It has done me no favors, and it nearly ended your king."

He leaned back against the solid dark wood of the cabinets and gave a careless shrug. "Useless? I assure you it's anything but that. In fact, I suspect the sword has already begun its divine workings."

The scowl on her face revealed her thoughts regarding his suspicion.

"Incredible as it may sound, justice was on my side when I wielded the sword, yet the blade failed to injure Namtar as I ran it through his heart. Sounds pretty useless to me."

His boisterous laugh filled the small room. "You tried to smite a God? Let it never be said you lack ambition, Priestess. Justice is not a weapon, it's a fire. The sword isn't designed to cut the flesh, but to purge the soul."

The scowl deepened. "That would've been handy information to have before risking my life in its retrieval since the death god has no soul, it remains as I said... useless."

"Perhaps."

When he again moved, it was to stand directly across from her. "Take me into your confidence, Priestess. I'll surrender Agate and vow to do all within my power to help you remove Namtar from the game board."

His hand reached out to hers to seal the deal, when she put up a finger and pressed it against the tip of his too straight nose, pushing him back.

"One second Lucifer, I'm still trying to figure out the fine print to this deal you offer…"

"No small print this time, the stakes are too high. I need my King alive to fulfill his destiny. And to accomplish that, I need you."

Still, she mulled over each word he had spoken, searching for that loophole each of his contracts carried. As she did, Lucifer's notorious curiosity won out and he lifted the lid from the small box in his grasp, inspecting the vials one by one before giving a tentative sniff.

"Dark Hells!"

With a loud pop, he snapped the lid shut and shoved the box into her hands, his gaze horrified. Those black tendrils once more forking through those azure eyes. "You two have serious issues."

With relief she clutched the small box to her chest, smirking at his horrified expression. “Trust me, you barely know the half of it.”

“That’s exactly what troubles me… do we have a deal, priestess?”

She took a cleansing breath and closed her eyes. With the allies she was making as of late, she would have little need for enemies.

“That depends on how useful an ally you are to me. Tell me, Demon Prince, what do you know of spirit crystals?”

Surprise flashed through his expression. “Enough to know of both the dangers and the potential they hold, and that much like the sword, they are ineffective when used against a god.”

His grin widened, turning positively Machiavellian. “But you have a plan.”

“Perhaps.”

“Do we have a deal, Amara?” He reached his palm out to hers again, and she placed hers upon it, feeling Cassius’s sigil warm uncomfortably upon contact.

“We do.”

67

WAR WAS NOT INTENDED

With their bargain struck, Amara followed the demon prince to rejoin the others. She had expected annoyance or irritation from them at having been made to wait, that would've been the natural response. Instead, the imprint of fear and wariness clung heavy in the air, momentarily stunning her as she stepped out of the antechamber. Her confusion growing when the indomitable Prince gave a hard shudder at her side, before slowly moving away from her.

"What in the nine hells is..?"

A powerful influx of infernal energy threw her off balance, the pressure within the air becoming heavy and oppressive, forcing her to lock her knees lest they buckle beneath her weight.

Not understanding, her eyes searched for her general, discovering a glint of alarm within the depths of her gaze. Awareness dawned, she realized it wasn't her who Dravite was staring at, but at the figure standing directly behind her.

"Oh hells."

The sin-eater's anger sucked all the air from the room, his power suffocating as it flooded the corridor. The overwhelming influx of infernal energy making it near impossible to move beneath its weight, she wasn't even sure how long she could keep upright.

Tendrils of darkness licked around her feet, her own power beseeching her to call it forth, to unleash its fury. With effort she forced it to yield,

would not admit to feeling threatened by him. The demon would never harm her.

With each passing moment, pressure continued to build, her own ire rising as her legs cramped up, threatening to give out beneath her weight.

“I won’t be made to submit, Sin.” Never again would she allow herself to be crushed beneath another’s heel, not even his.

She could sense him behind her, not close enough to touch, yet enough to make her fully aware of his presence.

“I would never force you to your knees, Mara...” His lips ghosted by her ear, his breath warming her skin. “You’ll kneel to me willingly, and when you do, I’ll worship you.”

His voice, his words, his presence, each seared through her, burning her. The demon was a lightning strike to her senses, sparking life into every single nerve ending of her body without even touching her.

“But first you’ll tell me exactly what it is you three are scheming.”

Agate was the first to lose the struggle, her legs giving out, her knees planting hard unto the stone floor.

“Sin, stop it.”

“Cass, you’re hurting her.” Jez called to him, voice sharp with anger, urging for reason.

The effort wasted, the angel was next to lose the battle against the oppressive energy as it continued to build. His grip reached for Dravite who wobbled beside him, steadying her as he was forced onto the stone. Dravite followed, her grip closing around the hilt of her athame to anchor her magick. Her general down, but never defeated.

Somehow she managed to remain standing, along with Levistus and Mephistopheles. The former looking thoroughly put out at the sin-eater’s actions, while the latter appeared to be... intrigued.

“First you enter a secret pact with my advisor, and now you meet in private with one of my governing forces.” His tone lowered to a whisper. “Tell me Mara, are you three conspiring against me?”

Her jaw clenched, her grip on the wooden box punishing. Injured pride raged through her, demanding she throttle the demon. He had no right to manhandle her attendants, and he certainly did not get to question her actions or loyalty.

“Perhaps we should cut back on your poisons, Sin, I suspect they’re rotting your brain. Tell me, how exactly would I be capable of plotting

against you without breaking the binding oath?”

“I think you capable of much. My father thought you dangerous enough to lock away. Perhaps he was right to do so?”

Indignation burned a path right through her senses. “You’re a royal pain in the ass sometimes, demon!”

His hand closed possessively over the swell of her hip, pulling her back against his chest. When his lips closed over the beating pulse at her throat, her mind went blank, her ire melting beneath that sinful kiss.

“What are you doing with *my* advisor and *my* archdeacon, Mara?”

“We’re trying to protect you.”

Her hand clapped to her mouth, her eyes narrowing as she turned to glare at him over her shoulder. He knew she couldn’t betray him. The demon had baited her by insulting her pride, and like an idiot—she had risen to it.

Nimble fingers plucked away a weight from her ear, the emerald drop earring disappearing into his pocket as his kiss trailed along the curve of her neck.

“I don’t need to be protected, I need to be feared… or loved.”

Against her will, her eyes began to close, her breaths falling in uneven spurts as his fingers trailed down her hip to splay against her. The heat of his touch burning through silk to warm her skin. Desire turned into lust.

She heard the shaky inhale of breath, his suppressed groan, could feel her body grow heavy with need.

“You’re feeding from me.”

“You’re burning for me.”

The large pin keeping her chignon in place was pulled from her nape, her hair spilling down as he buried his head in the silver strands.

“You’ve had your fun Sin, release them.”

“No.”

Something sharp was digging into her chest, pressing directly above her beating heart.

“SARRATUM!” Guards who’d gathered in the corridor struggled against the influx of energy. Their weapons drawn, dark magick rising to the fore, ready to attack.

Lowering her eyes she found her own hairpin pressed against her sternum, where it would be sure to pierce her heart.

“The tip of that needle is coated with a violent poison. If it gets in my bloodstream it’ll be perceived as an attack.” Her voice had gone breathless. “Sin, do *not* plunge us into a war.”

His jaw brushed along her cheek. “Then don’t let it come to that Mara…and answer my question. What are you protecting me from?”

“Death.”

He nudged the tip deeper between her ribs. “You’re lying.”

“I keep secrets, but I’ve never lied to you.”

She felt the snap of chain beneath his touch, followed by the slide of silk down her shoulder, exposing the swell of her breast to his heated gaze. Her skin grew flushed as his eyes moved over her, relief flashing through dark eyes.

“The bruising has healed.”

“Not the smallest mark left.”

Another chain snapped, silk falling open as the tip of the needle slid between the folds of her robe, scraping across bared flesh, down her chest, her sternum, before coming to a halt against her abdomen.

His breath warm by her ear, his grip on the pin unforgiving, yet his voice sounded pained.

“Why did you chose the Huntsman?” He sounded betrayed. “Why did you walk away from me?”

Namtar won’t stop, you’re leading him straight for the demon king…

“I told you already Sin, I can’t risk you.”

I can survive you hating me demon, but I could never survive losing you again.

“What does that mean, Mara? I don’t understand.”

She couldn’t do this, and he shouldn’t be asking. Why couldn’t he just leave things as they had been before? He was the sin-eater, King of the Hells, he had no need for her beyond that of an ally. If he kept searching for answers, he would find them. And she would lose him.

“You’re the only chance I have at vengeance against your father, I can’t risk that, I won’t go back to that cell.”

He purred by her ear, “that is *a* truth, I asked you for *the* truth.”

She could feel her nails digging into the wood of the poison case still held within her grasp. “It’s the only truth I have to give.”

With a low growl, he pressed the needle deeper into her belly, its sharp tip testing the resilience of her skin. He wouldn’t harm her on purpose, she

trusted that, but accidents happened. Panic surged. If blood was drawn she would not be able to stop her Dominae from calling for war against the Demonarchy.

“Demon, don’t… you risk too much!”

“Tell me about her. Tell me what you know about my Assat-shi. Explain to me why I’m being haunted by a girl I’ve never before met. And why her kiss carries the taste of your lips.”

The needle stung, piercing her skin.

“Cass, please!” She couldn’t risk using her magic, the volatile energy could cause his grip to slip.

Her heart was beating against her ribs, her body frozen in place. One wrong move and everything they’d built would come crashing down around them.

“Have you put a spell on me, Priestess? Did you find a loophole to our oath by driving me into madness? Perhaps that’s how you plan to take your vengeance against the demonarchy, maddening us one by one…”

“Cassius, that’s enough!” Levistus’s voice boomed through the corridor as dark wings sprawled out from behind his back. Power rushed from the former celestial like a tidal wave, pushing back the infernal energy while easing the heavy pressure holding them captive.

In a blur of movement, the hairpin was yanked away, its sharp tip embedding itself into the stone wall across the corridor, inches away from Levistus’s head.

“Not one more word from you, Prince of *Secrets*,” he sneered the title in accusation. “The Priestess and I are having a discussion.”

Darkness lashed out the moment Amara surrendered her hold on her magick, energy fusing together in tempestuous tendrils, flinging the sin-eater backward, placing distance between them.

“Playtime is over, demon.”

Rather than heed her warning, he moved for her, his arm coming around her waist to pull her back to him. The sound of her palm cracking against his cheek echoed through the corridor.

For a long moment, neither of them moved, their breaths falling in erratic spurts as each stared at the other in shock.

His head lowered, his fingers clutched her tightly as he pressed his lips to her forehead. “Shit, Mara. I’m sorry, I...”

“Shhh, I know.” A pang of guilt shot through her at the sight of the imprint of her hand burning against his cheek, her fingers gently stroking to ease away the sting. “I’m not trying to break your mind demon, I’m trying to save it.”

He pressed his cheek deeper into her touch, placing a kiss against his mark upon her palm. “One question Mara, just answer one.”

She nodded, his fingers trembling ever so lightly as his thumb brushed along her bottom lip. “How old were you when my father locked you in the Malsheem?”

Her unwavering gaze held his. “A little over a hundred I think, I was in there for so long that I lost track.”

“A hundred? That doesn’t make sense.”

Before he could delve any deeper he was pulled back by Levistus and Mephistopheles, her own guards and dominae instantly at her side, shielding her from what they had surely perceived as a violent standoff between their Queen and the Demon King.

She found Agate at her side, diligently pushing aside layers of silk to check for injuries while clasping the broken chains of her robes back together.

“Sarratum, we must get you examined for signs of poisoning.”

The sin-eater stood surrounded by his own entourage.

“We have matters to see to my King, it’s high time we made our way back to the Nessus,” Levistus said with a nod.

Mephistopheles turned to Amara with a gracious bow, that dazzling smile still in place. “Thank you for your hospitality, Queen of Asurim. Please consider my curiosity thoroughly satisfied.”

Breaking away from Agate’s fussing and moving past the wall of guards standing between her and her guests, she came to stand before Cassius, quickly pressing the heavily claw-marked box into his hands.

“It’s not your usual batch of poisons, you’re going too fast, Sin. Please take better care of yourself.” She turned her attention to the rest of the group. “Your visit was… stimulating. But if you’ll excuse me I do have other matters which require my attention, and you’ve claimed far too much of my time already.”

Spinning on her heel she managed to keep an even pace as she rushed out the corridor, her chin up, back straight, her dominae keeping pace at

her side. Her mood souring even further at the sight of their glares, she was going to have one hell of a time diffusing their concerns.

"Amara!"

Jez came to Cassius's side, roughly planting his shoulder into the demon's back with enough force to nearly topple him over.

"You earned that one, ass-hat. Don't do that again." Yet his hand clapped over his shoulder as their gazes followed Amara's retreating form. "Just come back to talk to her when you're less likely to start a war, yeah?"

"We are not done, Priestess."

That singular, clenching squeeze in her chest returned. "Yes Demon, we are…"

* * *

MEPHISTOPHELES STOOD next to Cassius as they stepped through to the Nessus, the satisfied grin on his face making a mockery of the disappointment he felt. He'd lost his temper; he threatened *her*.

Fingers moved to cover the spot where her sigil marked him, above his heart. Remorse assailed him. The hope of reestablishing their friendship, to have some link to her was lost. He acted out in jealousy and anger, confirming that he was going mad like his father.

Mephistopheles leaned in closer. "An unconventional strategy my King, but solid. I really thought you had her at the end, but alas, you asked the wrong question."

The demon prince grew silent for a moment, as if debating his own words.

"She wasn't always in the Malsheem, putting her there was Basileus's idea. Your father had her locked away in the dungeons of the Nessus. I know this because I was there during her sentencing. Difficult to forget such a frightened little creature facing off against the king of Hell. She was six years old…"

His chest seized, his heartbeat stuttering, his reality collapsing and colliding.

"Rumor tells that she spent three years locked within the Nessus before she was discovered. I believe you were around twelve years of age when

you started sneaking into the dungeons against your father's wishes." Mephistopheles gave a curt nod appearing mightily satisfied with himself as he eyed Cassius.

His mind was reeling with implications, his body tense with anger at learning a truth he somehow already knew.

He wasn't maddened. "She's real."

"Oh yes, and more surprisingly, you are too." Mephistopheles turned back to Cassius before stepping through. "You've achieved the impossible today, my King. You've made a believer out of the Devil."

Mephistopheles vanished, leaving Cassius with the dawning realization his life, his destiny, was forever changed. Exactly how much of what he believed was a lie? What was the truth? And *how* had he forgotten her?

* * *

"PRINCE MEPHISTOPHELES, I trust you've found the proof you needed?"

Domina Elmira's sultry voice greeted him as soon as he exited the portal and stepped into the marble halls of his own palace.

"Although I find your prophecy highly improbable, I've come to the determination that it is in fact, accurate. There is a living fire within the boy, one which by all reason should've been extinguished."

Another voice joined, words filled with pride. "I've spent centuries maneuvering all the pieces to their correct places upon the board. Amara has served her purpose well."

He moved to sink into the chair opposite Lord Barbatos, grinning widely as he pulled Elmira onto his lap. "I advise they never learn that you've been using them as pawns, neither will thank you for it."

Elmira's hand came to rest upon his shoulder. "He did what had to be done. Had he not sent Amara to Asmodeus, Cassius would've been lost to us. They are the only ones powerful enough to secure the realms from what is to come."

Barbatos redirected his attention back to the gleeful demon prince. "The death god was an unforeseen complication. Have you been able to confirm which path the Warlock Queen has chosen?"

"She spoke of a spirit crystal."

Barbatos leaned in ever so slightly from his seat. “Then the gargoyle child was successful in his task.” His dark robes rustled with every minute movement.

“That’s not all, it seems that the Blood Lord has done us an unexpected favor. The seal on the boy’s mind has been broken, it won’t be long before he remembers.”

Elmira’s tone was one of suspicion even as she pressed deeper into his lap. “What did you do, Lucifer?”

His grin widened, azure eyes sparkling with mischief. An emotion which he thought himself incapable of feeling had begun to take hold at the sight of Cassius embracing Amara — he felt hope.

“I simply gave our Prince a little push into the abyss, now we wait for our King to rise up from its depths.”

68

SOME SOLUTIONS BITE BACK

He walked through the halls towards his throne room, leading the rest of them, the heaviness at his back telling him his ‘wings’ had returned. Cassius paid little mind to anything as he clutched the case Mara had given him tight to his chest, turning back to face the jolly group.

They all stopped walking, Jez and Levistus looking wary. Levistus finally broke the silence.

“What did Lucifer whisper to you just now?”

“Don’t follow me,” Cass growled. Had Levistus known? Had he been keeping information from him?

A sharp breath cut through the silence of the room, his hands clenching around the wooden box in his grasp, his fingers rubbing along the tiny claw marks left there by Amara to soothe himself. Jez and Levistus were staring over his shoulder, he turned to follow their line of sight, and he saw her. Glasya.

This would not do. He had other matters occupying his mind, and he lacked the patience required to deal with his half-sister. Stalking straight for her, his fury spiking at the familiar smirk of satisfaction her face. Heat flared up around him, his wings turning from electrical blue into flames.

Thank the blessed Hells the throne room had remained empty, they would have no audience. The basalt stone walls and ceiling echoed back any word spoken louder than a whisper. Normally the hall was so filled with members of the demonarchy, the attendants had to raise their voices in order to be heard.

“This is not a good time for a social call.” He had to struggle not to snarl at his sister as she stepped closer.

“It wasn’t a good time for me to hear you killed an entire contingent of my guards.” She stepped forward, placing her hand on his chest.

“Leave.” Cass stiffened at her touch, it repulsed, as if his mind and body instinctively knew to reject the caress.

“Why, brother.” She tilted her head. “Are you asking me to leave the Nessus?”

“Provoking me won’t give you the desired results, Glasya, you shouldn’t have sent them.” He shifted the case to one hand, freeing up the other, circling it around the back of her neck. “You left me no choice but to act.”

“You know,” she said, stepping even closer as she trailed her hand down his chest, “we could just side-step all these games and bind ourselves.” The blue of her eyes glowed beneath her soot-black lashes, startling against her porcelain skin. Familiar, yet at the same time not. Perhaps due to yet another memory his own mind was keeping secret from him.

“We share a sire.” He moved his hand around to the front of her neck, circling her throat, his thumb brushing against that thin membrane of skin that dipped between her collarbones, the urge to puncture it overwhelming.

“You can’t be my consort.” He watched her eyes lock on to his mouth.

“See that’s where you’re wrong.” She tried leaning into his touch and he tightened his grip. “There is nothing stopping us from doing exactly that. Many of our kind do so, to secure our lineage. Who better to help secure your hold on the throne than me? I can give you heirs.”

Cass growled, picking her up by the throat so she was face to face with him, her feet fighting for purchase.

“Do you think I can’t feel your lust?” he snarled. “It disgusts me.”

He was done with feeling like an object to be used.

She coughed a little, still smirking. “You’re the embodiment of that sin, and you’re hot.”

Cass nearly dropped her, the thought of it making his stomach turn — then he realized she had sweat beading on her pale face, his wings were throwing a tremendous amount of heat.

“Think of all the complications that would be smoothed out by you taking me as your consort.” She closed her eyes, inhaling deep.

The walls shook, the ground beneath them rumbling in response to his rage. He dropped her, watching as she fell to a heap at his feet, then knelt beside her, securing the box upon his knee.

“I don’t care,” he spoke low so the sound wouldn’t carry, sparing her public rejection should someone be overhearing them. Still his fingers clenched around her chin so she was forced to look at him, and to listen. “Even if I could get a whole brood of children on you. It’ll never happen. We have an alliance on paper only, to appease our father.”

“Our power combined…” Her words were cut off when Cass grasped her jaw tighter.

“Your guards aren’t dead.” He pressed his cheek to hers, ignoring her whimper of need, speaking directly into her ear, “They have enough of their souls left to suffer in their imprisonment. I’m giving you one last opportunity to leave unscathed.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “Together we could rule it all.” She shook off his hand, got to her knees and leaned in close to speak against his neck.

“Be warned brother, that throne will belong to me or my line. Without me, your days as High King are numbered.”

She stood, righting herself, then walked out of the room with a regal grace, her fingers trailing over Levistus’s chest as she passed him.

Cass jumped to his feet, but she kept walking.

All was silent, highlighting the roar of his flaming wings, their spark reflected against the intricate obsidian paneling the palatial Malsheem fortress had been carved from.

He clasped Amara’s case back to his chest and took a step backward, all three of them watching him with cautious expressions. Jez stepped forward and was quickly halted by Dravite. He nodded to her.

“I need to be alone.”

With long strides, he made haste for his chamber, the library which he had claimed as his own private bedroom. He’d never moved into the Master bedroom, that had been his father’s sanctum, and it connected to the harem quarters. Neither held much appeal when compared to privacy and books.

Shutting the door behind him, he noticed his hands had begun to shake as he opened the case, relief that the vials were still intact, the cut crystal sparkling ominously in the firelight. He plucked up the middle one, not

really caring what torture it contained within. He needed oblivion, and he needed his ghost. Just for tonight.

Without hesitation he swallowed it down, placing the vial back in the case with a gentleness close to reverence, then braced his hands against the dresser, waiting for it to hit. It never took long, her venom always swift and merciless.

Memories kept churning up. The taste of Mara's lips mingled with the bite of the poison. He licked his lips, moaning softly. She tasted like a poison created just for him, the sweetness of a lingering innocence beneath the bite of sin. He craved to chase after it, to consume that innocence. He would take it from her and make it his own, and her along with it.

He shuddered as a wave of agony washed through him, ending with a burst in his brain. Blackness took him swiftly. He was vaguely aware of his hand knocking something to the floor as his knees gave out, he braced himself against the dresser, as his head fell weakly against the solid wood.

And finally, he saw her.

"And I'll like it?" Her forehead rested on the bars directly across from his, his fingers pushed through so he could touch her face.

"Yes, you'll crave it." Their mouths were inches apart, might as well have been miles. "My lips will be hot against yours, soft, because you'll be sensitive and ready for my kiss." His fingertips pressed against her lips. "Then I'll run my tongue along your bottom lip, as though I'm pleading for entrance." Both of their breaths sharpened.

"And I'll let you in?" She pressed kisses to his fingers as she spoke, a fine tremor running through her body. "Your tongue would get caught up on mine." She smiled, as though the thought were absurd.

Cass's breath left him in a huff.

"Yes." He shifted himself, his rock-hard erection beyond even throbbing. "And I'll take your tongue into my mouth and suck on it. Just the tip of it, very lightly."

Her cheeks flushed, her eyelids going heavy. "I would do the same to yours." She nodded with assurance.

He licked his lips and groaned. "Touch yourself."

"Now?" She blinked up at him, her hand already trailing down her body.

He nodded. "After I nibbled on your bottom lip, hard enough that the sting will linger for a few moments, I would kiss down your neck."

She shivered. “I’ll like that?”

He ran his fingertips lightly over her neck and she whimpered.

She gasped. “I see.”

“My hands would already be at your naked breasts.” He couldn’t reach far enough to touch them. “Touch them arramu-shi.” Love of my life. She was his life. Everything. “Run your fingertips over your nipples until they peak.”

Her body arched up into her own touch. “I would already be unclothed?” she asked breathlessly.

“Oh yes,” he said, his voice gone dark with promise. “My tongue would find the tip of your nipple first.” He watched her fingertips thrumming over them. “Pinch them.”

She gasped audibly when she did.

“When they’ve hardened into buds, I would take them into my mouth and suckle them, as a babe does.”

Her rough moan had him unfastening his pants.

“Touch yourself. Put your fingers between your legs and tell me if you’re wet for me.”

Her breath was hesitant, a furrow between her brows and a look of utter concentration on her face. She blinked and looked up at him, her eyes a shade of blue that he couldn’t compare to any water or sky that he’d ever seen.

“I’m so very wet.” Her lips flattened, her brows drawn together.

“Good. That’s good.” His fingers pressed against her lips again. “Rub yourself with it, until you find the spot you need…”

She sucked in a harsh breath, and he smiled darkly.

“Keep running your fingers over it — I have to…” He caught her eyes and looked down his own body, inviting her to see what he was doing with his free hand.

She groaned again, her movements growing furtive...

A spasm of pain invaded his mind, blanking out the memory.

He could feel the poison bleeding through his body. A thousand micro-bursts of agony, his nerve endings raw.

He was so fucking hard. Remembering that—he couldn’t place it—he didn’t remember why…

Pain roared through him, blurring the edges of reality as his body went into a shaking mess of adrenaline overdrive. He couldn’t keep his thoughts

straight, as if something was pushing back whenever he tried to delve deeper.

He had to… so fucking hard.

With a groan of agony and need his fingers eased the closing of his slacks, before his hand wrapped around his erection, needing to sink back into that memory. What had he done to have that memory stolen? Another hard groan escaped, his strokes hard, fast, *unrelenting* in his chase for her. His assat-shi.

Another memory surfaced.

He moved down the steps of his temple, looking down to find his hands coated in blood with his Priestess staring at him. His eyes rising up he noticed the ripped silk, leaving her breast exposed to his gaze. The sight spoiled by the red imprints from cruel fingers already bruising her skin. Rage such as he'd never felt was searing through him, the gargoyle had died too swiftly.

A deep fury settled over him… and with it came a rush of intense fear.

He needed to get to her.

Needed to save her.

She was so afraid… she didn't understand.

She was his to protect.

Her hands were in his hair, grasping tightly. He finally had her. The scent of her desire nearly as intoxicating as the liquid heat burning in her eyes—her expression spoke of yielding all to him, for him—she worshiped him, and he loved her. *His.*

The rightness of it too overwhelming to absorb, the sensation foreign, yet instinctively recognized. He'd felt it before; he was sure of it.

Climax flared through him before he even realized he had been close. The shattered images inside his mind blanked as he sank deeper into his own memories, searching for answers, searching for her.

Grasping onto his dresser to pull himself up, his mind returned to that night of Ostara's celebration. He recognized the look of anger and fear which had reflected in her eyes; he had seen it in the gaze of his ghost before.

"*I'm not sure I can bear the thought of you hating me, demon. But I know I couldn't survive losing you again…*"

Because Amara and his ghost were one and the same? Perhaps circumstances had been similar. His mind clutched onto a shadow of a

memory with threatened to slip past his reach, forcing it to surface.

The Hells shook as he roared out, his mind breaking him more than the poison could. He could feel the difference, the pain wasn't physical, instead it mental agony. The poison felt like mercy, this felt like punishment.

There had been despair in her eyes, her expression beyond fear. His need to protect was urging him to come to her side. But he couldn't move. He had… failed?

No, he had killed the gargoyle, he'd protected her.

"*Please don't do this.*" Her disembodied voice echoed through his mind.

"*Don't look Cass.*" Mara's eyes… filled with an urgent panic. "*Don't watch.*"

He jumped to his feet, bouncing off the edge of the dresser and slamming against the door frame before falling to the bathroom floor, his body a heaving, convulsing mess.

"Don't… Amara." His mind was gripped in a fever, his body an agonized heap. There wasn't a spot on him that didn't hurt. "No…"

Jez was shaking him. "Cass, stay awake."

Terror, like he'd never felt—never remembered feeling, tightened his chest. Helplessness—the fear that followed—panic shutting down his brain. His body shook. Couldn't remember how to breathe—

He shoved Jez out of the way, leaning over the toilet and emptying his stomach contents, heaving over and over with each tremor of fear and urgency that blasted through him.

"Amara needs to answer for this." Levistus was in the room, Cass tried telling himself he was safe, his body disagreed. "… poison like this."

More violent retching.

"… anti-toxin in existence," a female voice too.

He was broken.

Her eyes were pleading with him, searing into him. No matter how she begged, he couldn't look away. He had failed her; she had been his secret to keep, his to protect.

Her scream filled his mind, the sound igniting him, burning through him until he was nothing more than a white-hot blaze of fire.

"For the last fucking time, I'm telling you, it's not the poison." He recognized that voice. Jez. He could feel his link to the Herald reach out

like a lifeline, and through it, he found the focus he needed to pull himself together, his body warmed, the shaking and chills easing ever the slightest. “I can feel his emotions. I’ve never felt agony like this, not even when I lost my grace. It’s like someone shredded his soul.”

Apt. It rather did feel like that. He heaved some more.

His body was burning. There were flames all around him—no way out —

Panic hit him again, his body seizing.

“His heart…” the female voice was back.

Had he hurt her? Had he hurt *his own wife*?

His Assat who haunted him mercilessly? He’d never forget that look in her eyes. He hadn’t meant to burn her… but he was fire. Consuming everything around him without care.

A disaster waiting to be unleashed.

“Just calm down. You’re safe.” Jez again.

He would burn him too.

“Leave. *Please*. Go.” Cass tried to speak, he wasn’t sure if the words came out, he couldn’t hear anything above the ringing in his ears as it picked up volume.

Nails were digging into his scalp as he struggled to hold himself together when finally the room grew silent. Still. His senses focused, feeling the coolness of tile stone press against his. Feeling his own tears running freely down his face. And he gave into it. Pulling his knees up to his chest, wrapping around himself, weeping silently with great heaving sobs.

His mind was breaking, and he couldn’t even remember why.

69

THINGS TO KEEP HIDDEN

WHEN HE FINALLY HAD THE STRENGTH TO STAND, HE LEANED OVER THE sink, splashing cold water on his face, then on the back of his neck when that didn't work. When his heart started racing with adrenaline once more, he realized he needed warm water and soothing, not bracing. With a hot cloth over his face and a few moments of peace, he could once more think.

Research. He was good at that, he knew the library and archives well, knew vaguely what he needed to look for. With that thought, he left the bathroom, changed his sweat-soaked clothing and called out the door for an attendant to run to the archives for him.

An hour later, feeling sufficiently recovered, he sat at the small writing desk in what was now Jez's bedroom, flipping through an ancient book. The paper was so old it was absorbing the oil from his fingerprints.

She was nine when he had been twelve? Had that been one hundred and thirty-five years ago? It felt like a different life. As though history were being superimposed over his reality.

Couldn't be Mara. She was centuries old.

Still. Her eye color, that otherworldly shade of cerulean wasn't common. He could remember it so clearly now it was though it had been branded on his soul.

Perhaps he'd been wed to her daughter? His insides lurched.

"*You want to have children?"*

"*Only if they have your eyes."*

Everything inside of him rejected that thought. Perhaps… sister?

“Dravite, did Amara have a sister?” He vaguely recalled her mentioning sisters once, as they conquered their way across the nine dominions.

Soft sniffling from the bed came back in reply.

“Not now Cass,” Jez chided. “Come lay down, you’re pale as a sheet and I can see you shaking from here.”

“I don’t know why my sister would sign a deal with him—of all of them. He would own her.” Dravite sobbed, angrily wiping away at her eyes. Warlocks in their instinctual greed for power often gave in to bad bargains, Dravite’s sister was no different.

“He’s not a bad sort,” Cass said, running his hand down his face, his eyes bleary from reading the ancient calligraphy. “Better than owing your allegiance to a lesser demon?”

She nodded and hiccuped.

“Can I make you feel better?” Jez whispered.

She smiled and rolled up on her elbow. “Angel, you’re the sweetest thing.” She pressed a loud smacking kiss to his lips. “My sister is going to have to learn a harsh lesson, but it’s our way. Somehow I’ll get that contract back until then pain will serve her as teacher.”

“*You’ll remember this Cassius. Some part of this will be imprinted in your very make up. The lessons learned from pain are not forgotten.”*

Out of relative peace, the sound of his father’s voice rose up to echo through his mind.

“*Her promise has been etched upon my very heart and there’s nothing that’ll make me forget her words.”* His voice had spoken those words, no context, no origin to the recollection.

He recalled those eyes, though. Such fear. Grief. *Agony.*

His head throbbed. His heart hurt, not just hurt, he had felt it shatter inside of him. His fingers moved to find his heartbeat, feeling Amara’s sigil burning against his chest. Her heart had shattered. He stiffened when warm hands slid over his shoulders.

“Bed with you,” Dravite leaned over to whisper in his ear, “your angel is very concerned. Your heart stopped beating for far too long.”

She grasped his hand and pulled him to his feet; he took one last longing look at the prisoner records and followed her into their bed. Jez stretched out his wing for Cass to crawl onto and he snuggled right in.

“You need sleep,” Jez said, turning to face him as he pulled Dravite onto his shoulder. “She should’ve sent some sleeping potions instead of seizure-inducing ones.”

Jez was still a touch angry.

“Hush now. My Sarratum knows what doses the King is capable of handling.”

Jez let out an un-angelic snarl. “You remember anything else, Cass?”

He shook his head. He hadn’t told Jez the whole of it. Some memories he needed to keep sacred. Until he could figure out the bigger picture.

“Have you asked to see Domina Elmira? She might be able to see your past.”

Cass felt the blood drain from his face. “No. I’d rather not have anyone else digging around in my head.”

Dravite scoffed, reaching over Jez to slap his shoulder. “It’s not like that. She’s a medium, she can’t force your thoughts, only read them and follow their threads.”

But… Amara had. Hadn’t she? He had felt her power brush along his mind, easing him. And as the poison worked its way through his system, she had eased him into dream. His memory was scattered, and his head so fucked up he no longer was certain he could distinguish fact from fiction.

“*You gave me your heart.”*

His heart was destroyed. If he had given it to his ghost, then he’d buried it alongside her.

“Stop.” Jez smacked his hand down.

Cass looked at Jez, then down at their hands. He’d been digging his nails into his chest?

“It hurts,” he said on a sigh, examining the blood coating his fingers.

“Shit,” Dravite mumbled, climbing over both Jez and himself and out of bed. “I’ll go get bandages.” She gave a long-suffering sigh and padded across the floor, her bare ass swaying provocatively.

It did nothing for him. He could feel himself wasting for want of feeding but had no interest in sex.

“*I belong to you and you alone. This verse is perfect. ‘My body so two can be one’. I’ll be yours and you’ll be mine.”*

“Jez.” He looked over to his herald who was eyeing him with concern. “Something so very essential is missing. It’s killing me.”

Jez jostled his shoulder. “We’ll figure it out. We will.” He answered Cass’s look of skepticism. “You need to focus on what we’re going to do once Glasya regroups. We should plan a preemptive strike, catch her when she’s scattered.”

“Yeah. Probably.” He turned on his side and curled into Jez.

“Ahh!” Jez pushed him back. “You’re bleeding on me.”

Cass quickly rolled back over and looked down at his chest. He’d subconsciously clawed at her sigil. He let down the glamour and Jez let out a hissing breath.

“That’s where you’re bound to her?” His fingers brushed across the mark, then he wiped the blood off on Cass’s pants. “How’ve I never seen this before?”

“It’s glamoured. Cheap trick, but it had to stay hidden or too many questions would arise.”

“Oh.” Dravite sauntered back into the room, her step hitching and hands full of gauze fumbling. “I’m sure I’m not supposed to see that.” She blushed and turned her head.

“Why not?” Jez’s fingers paused as he looked up with puzzlement.

“Binding between warlocks is a private thing, it exposes a vulnerability we never reveal to others, they may try to use it against us.” She set the bandages down and sat on the edge of the bed, poking at Cass’s chest. “It’s more than marriage, its binding is quite literally unbreakable. The vows given are marked upon the soul.”

“Is that so,” Jez mused, his gaze going unfocused. “I like that.” He looked back to Dravite who was fussing with a cloth and didn’t notice the angel’s expression.

“She bares her mark in public.”

“My Sarratum is... unusual in her behaviors, but she always has her reasons. Now you need to wash that off before I bother covering it—” Dravite’s words were cut off by a light tapping at the bedroom door.

Who in all the Hells had walked through his room? He had transformed this bedroom to one day be his consort’s suite, the only accessible door led in from his personal rooms. He hadn’t understood the impulse which had driven him to order its construction, he did now. It was by far the safest location within the Nessus, he could protect her here.

His mind snapped back to attention when Dravite jumped up, Jez grabbing for her hand too late to stop her. One hand clutched around the

hilt of an athame as she moved for the door.

“No one should be in your bedroom at this hour,” Jez growled

“Leira to see you, Cass.” Dravite said with a frown, not even trying to hide her dislike of the girl.

Cass heaved out a sigh, his body spent. He didn’t have the energy for this—

“Watch yourself,” Jez said, grabbing his arm as he moved to get up.

Cass nodded briskly, pulling his shirt over his head as he walked.

Leira was there, peering around him to see into Jez’s room, glaring daggers at the bed. Cass closed the door behind him and grabbed her arm, dragging her back into the less personal part of his own room.

“I came to…” She bit her lip and gave him a pleading look. Damn, but he hated that. Made him feel things he shouldn’t for the little waif. “See to your needs, my lord.” She did a quick curtsy, so adorable it made Cass grin.

“I have to shower.” Cass stepped back from her. Hells the blood was trickling. He hadn’t even noticed himself doing it — surely a clear sign of impending madness.

“I could,” her eyes drifted to the side before coming back to his, “join you? If you’ll have me… my lord.”

He frowned, pondering the repercussions. She was familiarizing herself far too much, but it was rather endearing. Like she had a schoolgirl crush on him.

“Yeah sure. Come on then.” Cass grabbed up her hand and led her into his bathroom. “Have you ever showered with another?” he asked while stripping his clothes back off, her eyes following his every movement. She shook her head slowly, licking her lips.

“You’ll have to take off your clothing, love,” Cass said with a grin, tugging at the bottom of her shirt.

She gave him a beaming smile, ripping off her clothes in her haste, meekly following him into his shower. He washed quickly as she watched, her arms crossed over her chest and her wings tight to her sides.

“There, darling, come on now.” He reached for her hand and pulled her under the water. “Let’s get you all wet.” He pulled her back to his chest, her wings plastering to him, as he ran his hands down, over her breasts to meet at her mound.

She sighed and leaned into his touch, her legs easing apart. He grabbed the inside of one thigh, giving it a squeeze before trailing his fingers up through her folds, dipping into her sheath before circling her clit.

She let out a mewling cry and shifted, trying to turn around in his arms.

“Not this time, darling. You can keep those claws to yourself.” He ran his lips down her neck, nipping lightly at the bottom, her pulse briefly beating against his tongue.

He stepped back for a moment, clearing his head. He was angry. Still pissed at her for that shit. It wasn’t going to happen again.

He pushed her hands against the tile, holding them together so he could grip them in one hand, his other hand circling around her hips, parting her legs, his fingers pressing into her wet sheath.

“There now,” he whispered at her ear. “I’m going to take you just like this, and you’ll stand nice and still and let me have my way with you, yes?”

Her wings unfurled, dropping to the ground. She nodded and gasped as his fingers curled to rub over that spot on her inside wall. She moaned and sobbed at the same time when he found it, her legs giving out.

“You’re going to come hard.” He kissed down her neck, his thumb applying pressure to her clit as his fingers worked her g-spot. “Soaking wet already.”

“Yes,” she gasped. “I can’t…”

“You can.” He pushed her feet farther apart with his foot. “Ah-ah, don’t move.” He pressed her hands tighter to the wall when she struggled against his grip.

He felt her body tensing, her juices running down his hand and her leg, her sheath clenching around his fingers—

“Hells yes… I…” She screamed when it hit her, her body spasming with each pulse.

He took his fingers out, easing his cock inside of her, hard and deep. He picked up her leg with his free hand, shifting her up so he could get a deeper angle, and fucked her without mercy. Her cries turning hoarse as she screamed her throat raw.

“I can keep this up all night. How long can you keep coming? All over me?” He pounded into her.

“No more. By the Hells, I can’t,” she screamed again and melted into more full body spasms.

With a grunt, he pulled out, stroking himself as he shot off against her wings. Never failed to bring a smile to his face.

He released her hands, grabbing her around the waist when she nearly toppled over, turning her around so she was back under the water.

“There now, love. I need to get some sleep.” He kissed her cheek and backed up a step. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Anger was still storming around in his chest when he climbed out of the shower. He dried himself with brisk motions and wrapped the towel around his waist.

He walked back into Jez’s room and exchanged his towel for pajama bottoms, ignoring the questions in both of their eyes. As well as the heavy musk of sex in the room.

He lay on the bed, pulling blankets from under Jez and over his waist, and Dravite scrambled over them again, pushing Cass onto his back and silently fixing bandages over his chest.

They knew what he’d been doing, Jez had likely felt his impotent fury, to their credit neither said a word.

70

TO MARKET, TO MARKET, TO BUY…

IT HAD BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE CASSIUS DEPARTED THE HALLS OF THE ninth temple, three days since his sigil had burned with the intensity of hell's fury.

A missive from her General had soon followed, describing the incident while reassuring her that the sin-eater was recovering. Placing Dravite at his side had been the correct decision, no matter her personal feelings about the arrangement, having her there was a comfort.

Still, it hadn't prevented her from waking En-Rasputin and the rot drinkers, insisting all poisons be replicated and tested. She fervently hoped to confirm his reaction had been caused by a bad batch of poison, but the recipes had proven meticulous. In fact, the poisons she'd given the demon should've had far less effect than the ones she normally provided.

There was only one other reason his body would've suffered so, his mind was breaking. He was remembering. If she wanted to save him, then the time for inaction had come to its end.

This knowledge led Amara to send a missive to the eighth layer and was the reason she now traveled the peerless markets of Anu-Hia, where for the right price one could acquire all sorts of forbidden magicks.

The meat market, to use its more popular moniker, was comprised of a collection of small islands floating aimlessly within space. Its location altered between dimensions and only those who suffered no scruples regarding its illegal trades knew how and where to find it. That did not

appear to deter business in the slightest, for even at this early hour the market streets were brimming with merchants and buyers alike.

This place was a safe haven for pirates and assassins, as such many of her own people conducted business within these bazaars. Along with their offerings of enchanted oils and perfumes, warlocks often offered their services in the form of curses and plagues, the skill in high demand and sure to make good coin.

The Gargoyles were found lending their strength and cunning as mercenaries and privateers to whoever possessed the deepest pockets. And then there were the Needlers, Asurim's very own maddened assassins. When not on duty these deadly poison masters often gathered in Anu-Hia, to gamble, whoremonger or do some transactions on the side.

Here, anything was for sale, and to anyone. The merchandise as varied as cursed diamonds of a fallen empire, to a group of freshly captured slaves. Vampires, demons, warlocks, fae, gargoyles, mortals and even the occasional rare dragon shifter, all unfortunate enough to be captured while traveling outside protected territory would inevitably find themselves standing upon the auction blocks of Anu-Hia.

Asurim might no longer recognize the legality of its practice, but despite her disapproval, both slavery and this market had a place within the realms, it filled a need.

Amara herself was a testament to that, for she had come here today in search of a spirit crystal, a magick element so foul many regarded its usage as the highest of taboos. Mephistopheles informed her there was a spirit crystal to be found within this rift, and she had learned the name of who possessed it.

The temperature on the island was scorching beneath the three suns lighting up the sky above. Still, discomfort was preferable over discovery, so with a hard tug she secured the hood of her cotton cloak, concealing her features while covering the linen tunic and trousers she wore, leaving only the soft leather boots visible.

The voices of the unfortunate being led onto the auction blocks was carried upon the salty ocean breeze, their cries underscored by bawdy tavern songs and peals of laughter spilling out through the opened windows of brothels and gambling dens.

Stalls lined the streets as far as the eye could reach, creating a visual masterpiece of color. She walked passed a merchant selling enchanted

sweets who shared a table with a vendor of ritualistic voodoo supplies. The next stall displayed a beautiful selection of exotic fabrics and textiles, and stood adjoined a table which overflowed with vials of poisons and potions.

A small smile curled her lips as her gaze roamed the inventory, and she would bet her weight in emeralds that at least half of those vials were filled with nothing more than troll piss and scented herbs. The only thing more satisfying than making a sale was duping a gullible buyer.

Her gloved fingers ran longingly along the length of hand-dyed cashmere, its color bringing to mind the orange sky of Gaia during sunrise.

“Come see our wares! We carry the finest selections textiles from every corner of the realms. We have Fae silks from Tír na nÓg, heavy brocades from Nuit, lightweight cottons from Gaia, and sturdy leathers from Draconia…”

“Mama, I need to go to the temple!”

The woman’s sales call interrupted by a familiar voice, one who had her searching for the small girl, finding her tugging at her mother’s skirts.

“Cora?”

Disbelief had her call out to the girl, shocked to discover Maleficus’s young friend roaming the dangerous markets. “Shouldn't you be at the academy?”

Bright eyes widened, rosy cheeks flushing a deeper crimson when recognition struck. “It’s you! Mama come see, I told you I met her!”

She barely stifled a groan, realizing she had just forfeited any real chance at anonymity.

“...what are you going on about Cora? Don’t harass our customers, you’ll be sending us to the poorhouse if you... oh dark gods, Sarratum-sa…”

Amara’s hand shot out to hand to steady the woman before she could take a knee and expose her identity to all within the market street. Nothing traveled more swiftly than gossip.

With a short nod and a perplexed expression, the woman confirmed she had understood and straightened. Her expression a cross between bewilderment and awe.

“Why isn’t she at the academy?” With effort that she managed to keep her voice pleasant, when in fact she was feeling quite the opposite. Anu-Hia was rampant with privateers and snatchers, one moment of distraction

and the girl could find herself upon one of those auction blocks as merchandise.

“This one kept sneaking out of the academy to go to the temple at all sorts of unforgiving hours. The academy felt it could no longer guarantee her safety, and Cora found herself expelled.”

“But mama, if I don’t pray for him when the gods are awake, he won’t have any protection, and the Hells will eat him! He needs me…”

She recalled her own pleas to the death god, remembered her despair in wanting to save Maleficus from such a fate, and immediately understood.

“Maleficus isn’t in the Nessus, Cora. I assure you his spirit is safe and cared for.”

“You promise?”

“Cora, do remember who you are speaking to!” Her mother’s voice grew pitched and frightened, her expression horrified.

Amara merely smiled. She had feared the boy had gone unloved in his short life, only to discover he had in fact been loved fiercely and loyally by this tenacious creature.

“I was given a vow.”

Violet eyes sparked, lit up by her bright smile “I have his books.”

“And you must return those to me, but only after you graduate. No more running away or skipping classes, Cora. Our realm lost one bright mind, Asurim simply can’t afford to risk another. It’s back to the academy for you.”

The two tails tied atop her head bobble vigorously in understanding. “Mama, I have to return to school, otherwise I can’t return the books.”

“Oh praise be, thank you Sarratum.”

Cora, like any child in Asurim was adopted into a warlock family, but that did not seem to influence the affection the woman felt as she hugged Cora close.

“You have an astounding effect on my granddaughter, Sarratum-sa.”

“Excuse me?” Amara’s gaze flicked up to find an elderly looking man seated atop a stack tipped barrels. His appearance was unusual even amongst the patrons of Anu-Hia, his robes appearing burned and scorched. He was facing her directly, as if able to see her, yet his eyes were covered by soot smeared bandages.

“Inspired by the boy’s ambitions she’ll rise to the rank of Domina one day. Young love is a powerful energy, some claim it to be powerful enough

to even challenge destiny."

"It isn't. Maleficus was destined to become Sarrum..."

The soft chuff of laughter sounded breathless from him, and had that been smoke coming from his mouth?

"Our Sarrum still lives and you think to replace him with another? No highness, the boy served his great purpose, my granddaughter will serve hers. And you must serve yours, Sarratum-sa. I have already foreseen the end."

If the odd man had wanted to secure her attention, he succeeded. "What is it you know, seer? Do know of a way to save him, or of any way to break this curse?"

Another chuff of laughter, followed by yet another billow of smoke and ash. "Only death can break the curse Sarratum, the death god must receive his due. And you already know what must be done to save Sarrum sa, or you would not be here."

She felt a tug on her side. "Sarratum?"

The man struggled to rise up from his seat upon the barrels "I must go, my daughter looks at you with worry. When she asks what was said, tell her that the price was paid long ago. She'll know what it means, and help you on your path."

Another forceful tug had her hands flying to her hood, securing it before falling back. "Sarratum, why are you talking into the air?"

"Cora, manners!"

Air?

She turned to give the girl an incredulous stare before quickly turning her gaze to the stack of barrels where the old man had been sitting, finding it empty except a slight stain of ash.

"I… *suppose*... I was speaking to your grandfather?"

This time the ponytails atop Cora's head swished as she vigorously shook her head in denial. "Nuh uh, grandpapa died before I was born, mama and I still lay out offerings to him each sunrise and sunset. She says his spirit is restless with unfinished business."

"Hush now Cora. Forgive her Sarratum, she gets a little excited when speaking of my father, he was a gifted seer who had the privilege of serving your grandfather."

There was a strenuous pause, then a deep intake of breath, as if to collect courage. "Forgive my bluntness, but... was there perhaps a message

for me?”

Judging by her expression, the woman was as perplexed as Mara herself felt. “Yes. He told me that the price was paid long ago.”

“Mama! The prophecy.”

The poor woman had gone as white as a sheet, and for a moment Amara feared she would tip over. But then tears filled her eyes, from... happiness?

“Praise be the gods, my father can finally stop walking the lands of Kur, and pass on to the great beyond.”

She began frantically digging through the cart of stacked fabrics before breaking away a panel, revealing a box.

“Your father, he was burned?”

“Many believe it was madness that claimed his life, but it was destiny. My father looked too far and saw the horrors fate has in store for us. That night he gouged out his own eyes in despair. He left the next day, and when he returned to us… he set himself on fire.”

A weight was pressed into her hands and when looking down she found a kamarband had been placed in her hold. Nine silver chains wove together, slivers of sparkling tourmaline connecting each link, the color reminiscent of black smoke. The waist chain was breathtakingly beautiful.

“I’ve never seen its equal.”

“It was meant for you Sarratum. It has found its way to you for a reason, so not remove it, keep it on you always.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because those were his final instructions before running into those green flames.”

None of it made sense. But the seer had *known*. Had called her demon by the title he would never come to claim, Sarrum. Her king and consort, her husband.

With shaking fingers she clasped the much too beautiful chain around her waist, concealing it beneath tunic and cloak.

“I am buying all of it, pack your wares and return to Asurim, and never return to this place, it’s not a place for honest trade. From now on you will service the temples only, providing fabrics for myself, my attendants, and the temple acolytes. Go to the ninth temple and speak with Er-Agate, she’ll see to the arrangements.”

Again her hand shot out to halt the woman as threatened to go onto her knee. “Your name?”

“Aneki, Sarratum sa. We’re in your debt.”

“I suspect it’s the contrary Aneki. Now go, and tell no one it was Anu-Hia where we met.”

“It will be as you wish, Sarratum.”

With a nod of agreement, Amara turned to Cora, giving a playful tug at one of those bouncing tails. “I think I’ll be seeing much more of you in the future young Cora, learn all you can at the academy, and stay safe.”

Satisfied to see the family already packing the cart, Amara gave a nod in farewell before disappearing into the chaos of the bazaar.

71

YE BE SPEAKIN TO THE CAPTAIN

ROUGHLY TWENTY MINUTES LATER SHE FINALLY ARRIVED AT HER destination, the appearance of the ramshackle shop stopping her in her tracks.

Her head tilted to the side, her brows furrowed in contemplation, then she checked the address again. Rather than the extravagant establishment she had been expecting, this place looked as if it would come crashing down with the next gust of wind.

Its stone foundation had shifted, tilting the building and giving it the appearance of toppling forward. The walls were crumbling, and the tiled roof showed a number of holes through which birds were busily swooping in and out.

The shop was supposedly owned by one of the most notorious collectors within the realms, renowned for his impeccable taste and ruthless pillaging.

The address was correct. Perhaps the Prince of Contracts had misled her?

“You don’t strike me as the type that gets lost, Priestess.” Mephistopheles stood by the doorway, appearing from one blink to the next.

Outwardly he was as devilishly handsome as ever. Jet black hair slicked back as was his usual, a tailor-made suit hugged every muscle, and that dazzling smile firmly in place. Yet those azure eyes of his were

glaring daggers. The Prince of Contracts loathed tardiness, unfortunately for him, she found she rather enjoyed vexing him.

“I didn’t get lost, I went shopping.” Technically not a lie.

Dark tendrils forked out over those brilliant eyes as he came to tower directly over her. “You forget who you’re trifling with, my time is precious.”

She merely shrugged. “In light of the circumstances I’d say mine more so than yours.”

When he took a breath to retort when she opened up her cloak ever so slightly, revealing the kamarband fastened around her waist, her tone serious.

“Have you ever seen anything like it? It’s tourmaline, but I can’t place the energy embedded within the crystals.”

The breath left the Demon Prince in a rush. “Yes, I know of it… keep it on you, and do *not* remove it.”

Before she could press for more details, the demon turned for the door and opened it to her, a wordless indication he said all he would on the subject. With an agitated sigh Amara relented and followed, knowing full well that when Lucifer’s mind was made up on something, not even she could hope to alter it.

A bell sat attached to the door, its soft chime sure to alert the shop keeper of their arrival, if the poor bugger wasn’t buried beneath debris and rubble somewhere.

Yet as soon as they stepped across the threshold, the small, ramshackle shop shook loose its illusion, its glamour of dilapidation and ruin fading into a new reality. Like her cottage, the shop was under an apparition spell, broken the moment one entered the premises.

The next instant they found themselves standing in the middle of what appeared to be a massive storage facility. The high wall not cracked cement, but solid travertine stone appearing more than capable of withstanding the elements.

Despite the many shelves and crates occupying the hall, calling it a warehouse ill-described the space, for their surroundings could challenge some of the more prominent archives and museums found within the realms.

Art in all its forms was on proud display, portraits and paintings from various realms and eras took up most of the wall space, statues and

artifacts cluttered every corner. Throughout the colossal building, beams had been mounted to run its length several times over, creating storage shelves upon which crates were stacked as far as the eye could see.

Dock workers were scurrying about, males and females laboring as they sorted the crates, each undoubtedly containing some priceless artifact that would soon be found for sale on the black market, and offered to the highest bidder.

Unable to resist the temptation to see as much as she could of the treasures kept within, Mara lowered her hood while spinning in place. She could likely spend a century trapped within and still not discover all the hidden treasures.

“It appears Captain Barnaby is still in the business of pillaging…”

“And business is good, highness.” A booming voice greeted them as The Captain himself approached.

“Welcome to my humble abode, Prince of the Hells and Queen of Asurim, I’ve been expecting you. Please join me in my office so we may talk in private.”

Captain Barnaby had made a name for himself as a legendary pirate who conquered the uncharted oceans of space, his wealth and wiles ensuring his place among most notorious beings of the realms.

Giving a nod towards the Prince, the Captain presented his arm for her to take as he escorted them to his office, and she was forced to tilt her head back to meet his curious gaze. Standing at five foot nine she wasn’t exactly short of stature unless compared to demons or the fae.

Captain Barnaby kept his energy imprint cleverly repressed with cloaking spells, but they weren’t powerful enough to hide the truth of his lineage to her. She could sense the power of the elements hum through him still, he was born from the wind. The Autumn Court, for there was no doubt it was blood of the Dark Fae which ran through The Captain’s veins.

One rich hazel eye locked with hers, while the other remained hidden behind a steel-plated eye-patch. That sparked her curiosity, steel being a high percentage iron, it was an odd choice for a Fae, who’d normally suffer a violent reaction when exposed to the metal. But not Captain Barnaby it would seem.

As they moved towards the sturdy double doors she noted how the warmth of his eye well matched his dark brown hair which hung unbound across broad shoulders. It suited him, she decided.

Upon arriving she noted how the doors had been designed to fool the mind, creating the illusion they were entering the captain's quarters of a ship, rather than the office of a storage facility.

As soon as they stepped inside, the illusion was complete. Faux windows surrounded them, the enchanted glass displaying a moving panorama of deep blue sea and a bright horizon.

Nostalgic, since he traveled galaxies rather than waters, but looking at that endless horizon she understood why the captain would find himself longing for the seas when on land. The space contained an escritoire and dining table with matching chairs, a small organ, an alcove which cleverly concealed a bed, and a large bookcase which was lined with worn literature and maps. The wood paneling and floorboards were lined with tapestries, giving it a cozy and luxurious feel, despite the imposing character residing within.

The only thing which broke the spell was the fact their captain was lamentably lacking the standard attire for one carrying his title, no black band ran across his chest, a symbol pirate lords wore over their heart to signify they recognized no ruler or laws. Rather than the stuffy coattails and stiffly starched pantaloons most elite of the sea favored, Captain Barnaby looked well at ease in supple leathers and cotton blends.

He rolled up his sleeves before pulling out her chair, revealing bronzed and heavily tattooed skin.

"May I offer you some libations? Beer, rum?"

"Whiskey."

"A cup of tea for me."

A cabin attendant scurried off to retrieve the orders, while Captain Barnaby took a seat at the heavily carved escritoire. He pulled a chain from around his neck, placed the attached key inside the lock of a drawer, then pulled a small box from its depths.

Anticipation hung in the air, yet he did not open the lid until the attendant had served their drinks and vacated the space, leaving them to discuss business in private.

"I must be honest, I never had any true intention of selling it. I find myself hesitant to have such a devious magick released back into the realms."

With that said, the box was opened to reveal a captivating crystal, its radiance as beautiful as it was unnatural. She noticed The Captain was

keeping his eye averted, as if leery to behold it. And rightfully so, being Dark Fae born, he more than most would know what magick the crystal was capable of.

“A soul snatcher.”

“Exactly, in the wrong hands tragedy could befall us all.”

“One only need ask the dragons to know this. Rest assured that The Priestess already has a soul in mind for the crystal, one which will bear no consequence to your business, Captain.” Mephistopheles took a sip of his tea, leaving Barnaby to stare at him, Mara didn’t look away from the mesmerizing crystal.

Legends told that through the centuries many had become so enthralled by the crystals that impulse led them to reach for it, becoming trapped by its magic before even realizing they were in danger. She now believed those legends, for her own fingers had inched towards the box before she realizing and quickly pulled them back.

With effort, she forced her gaze to break away from the crystal to look at the demon prince at her side. “Will it accomplish what needs doing, you think?”

If anyone could challenge her own knowledge of these crystals, it was surely the demon whose entire existence revolved around enslaving souls. Same objective, different methods.

She grinned when he pushed the box away ever so slightly as if offended by the sight, confirming that even the indomitable Mephistopheles felt reluctant in handling the spirit crystal. It would be quite harmless once it locked onto a soul until then not many within the realms would dare pick it up.

Mephistopheles was silent for a long time, his brows drawn in concentration before finally answering. “If the plan is to link your essence to the crystal, then yes, It can be done. I can arrange it so the crystal will fully claim your soul upon the time of your death, and no sooner, but know that you’ll still be a slave to the will of whoever possesses it. It’ll be similar to a debt — a contract — and the moment your life expires, the crystal will demand its due, swallowing your essence into its depths, where it’ll remain forever trapped. I must warn you that Hell is a much preferable fate, Priestess.”

“Spoken like a Prince who was never made to suffer the horrors of his own realm.”

A shadow darkened those azure eyes, and for a moment she would almost imagine it was remorse that flared through their depths.

“My apologies, I spoke out of turn.”

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, worrying it before asking the question plaguing her mind. “And Namtar?”

That dazzling smile faltered, his brows knitting together, giving the Prince of Contracts an unnervingly serious appearance. “If he consumed your soul at the time of your death, then your soul would become his. With a soul to anchor him and the crystal linked to your essence, there is a decent chance the crystal will claim him.”

“How decent?”

The sound of slow applause snapped her out of her darkening thoughts, she found The Captain’s inquisitive gaze on her. “So you plan to trap an ancient deity within a spirit crystal, I must say this plan is ingenious. But forgive me for pointing out the obvious highness, this plan would, in fact, require your death.”

The shrug she gave was well rehearsed, a standard gesture when she didn’t want people prying deeper than they already were. She understood the cost and was willing to that price.

“Despite my best efforts to outrun death, the bastard is licking at my heels. What do think of the chances?”

She held his gaze, making it no secret she already unraveled his heritage and the reason he felt wary of unleashing the crystal into the reams. The last time the crystals had been used, his kind had nearly caused the extinction of dragons.

“*If* Lord Mephistopheles can indeed delay the crystal’s claim by feeding it an imprint, it should work. Once the death god claims your soul and fuses it with his own essence, the crystal will make no distinction.”

“Right then.”

With a shaky breath, she pulled a satchel of alchemist’s gold from the inner lining of her cloak. Alchemists gold was not true gold, but a metal that could perfectly copy any other metal it was exposed to, no matter how rare or complex. That made one coin nearly priceless, her satchel was filled with them.

“We have a deal Captain Barnaby, I am sure you’ll find that this will more than cover the price of the crystal’s acquisition and your silence. I trust that what you’ve learned here today won’t be repeated.”

The smile on the captain’s face widened as he inspected the contents of her offering. “You’re most generous, highness. I shall be aggrieved to lose such a benefactor. Which is why I must ask, are you quite certain you must die?”

Again her eyes moved to the crystal, her lips thinning into a firm line upon realizing she was staring at what would soon be her prison. “I’m afraid that my needing to die is quite possibly the only thing we are certain about.”

She’d made her Cassius a vow to protect the sin-eater, and this was the only way she could keep that promise.

“Lucifer, once this is done I’ll grant the sin-eater possession of the crystal. Should the crystal fail to claim Namtar, then make sure the demon uses the crystal for barter. My soul in exchange for his life, salvation from the fade wrapped in a shiny crystal gift box.”

Her nose scrunched up, the sin-eater's stubbornness sure to cause issue. “He’ll refuse at first, and likely be furious once it’s done, but it’s up to you to guide him, Mephistopheles. I trust Levistus even less, and the Herald is yet untried and shares a link to his emotions, he won’t do it. He is your King, Lucifer, make sure he survives this time.”

Captain Barnaby was scowling by the time he interrupted. “Highness, with all due respect. I am not unaware of what harm has befallen the King of Hell, but I must remind you that no one has ever survived the awakening. How do you know the ancient ones are powerful enough to spare him? The moment King Cassius becomes aware of what was done to him...”

“He is already remembering Captain. By using me as barter, the gods will be forced to figure out how to keep the sin-eater alive, or they’ll lose their chance at surviving the fade. Mankind is fickle, their memory short and their lives but brief. While in possession of the crystal the Demon King would hold the only sure way for any of them to survive the fade. Trust me, if you knew the gods as I do, then you’d know them to be ruthless and relentless. They’ll stop at nothing to see the Demon King live should that ensure their own salvation.”

Heavy boots landed on the opposite sides of the escritoire, the captain raising his glass in the air as he stared at them both. “Seems I made the right decision by choosing to not make enemies with either of you.” His eyes went back to her satchel. “Indeed, I am much richer for it.”

“Very well, let’s get this done shall we?” She moved the coins closer to the captain's side. “Your vows, captain.”

“I vow this transaction to be complete, I vow not a word I heard today will be shared to another by me. I vow to not speak of your plans or your presence here today to anyone or anything.”

“Aaand…” she prompted.

He dared to scowl at her as if he were a chastised child. “And... I vow not to raid Asurim as soon as word of your untimely death arrives.”

She smirked at him while pushing the satchel over. “Nice doing business with you, Captain.”

“The feeling is mutual. If you’ll excuse me, I have a feeling I know what’s to happen next, and I lack the stomach for acts of self-sacrifice. It weakens it and makes one susceptible to scurvy.”

“Hogwash. Fair tidings to you, Captain Barnaby.”

He surprised them both by lowering himself into a deep bow, “As lucrative as today’s business was, I close it with a heavy heart. Farewell, Queen Amara, I wish the fates had been kinder to you.”

With that said the double doors opened and then closed again, leaving Amara and Mephistopheles alone in the room with the newly acquired crystal.

A deep sigh, a moment to recollect herself, then her tone was once again even. “Now you, Prince of Contracts. I’ll have your vows to me.”

“You would have made a decent Princess of Contracts, Priestess.”

The smile he gave her almost appeared genuine then, perhaps it was because this time, she had been the one to write the fine print at the bottom of the death contract.

“I would’ve made you regret marrying me within the first minute, now quit stalling before I start thinking you to be the sentimental type.” She tried to smile and failed.

“I, Mephistopheles, vow to surrender the spirit crystal and the soul it possesses to you, Amara, as soon as the transfer has been completed. I won’t claim ownership over crystal, nor will I use it to command your actions against your will. According to your wishes, I’ll act as advisor to my King when the time comes, and insist he use the crystal to bargain a deal for his life, be it with Namtar or any of the deities capable of saving him.”

With that said, he reached for the box, the crystal's powerful enthrallment almost offensive to her now, its beauty not able to hide away that is was in fact a prison — her prison. She licked her lips, her mouth bone dry, her fingers shaking as she reached out for the crystal. No matter how it ended, she was going to lose her life and freedom anyway. Then why did she feel so very so frightened?

This would place power back into the sin-eater's hands. Saving him would be her final play, her vengeance, and salvation. Her promise kept to her demon.

Her voice shook, and she refused to look at the demon prince, sure he would see the fear in her eyes.

"What will happen to me?"

"This is going to hurt, you know the pain I speak of, so be sure to suppress your bind to Cassius. It won't do for him to come storming in mid-transfer. Once the imprint has been taken, the crystal becomes dormant until the time of physical death."

Her fingers closed around the beautiful crystal with a hesitant touch, feeling it warm in her palm. Within moments an overwhelming sensation of wrongness began to take hold, her mind screaming at her to let it go, to release her grip. But she couldn't, the crystal already latched to her essence.

The next instant, agony ripped through. As if she were being sucked into an empty void, darkness consuming everything, leaving nothing intact, not even her as she was torn apart. Her ears rang with the sound of her screams, yet all she focused on was shielding her link, refusing to alarm her demon.

A thousand knives cut her from the inside, prying loose her very soul as the stone imprinted itself upon her essence. Mara heaved, trying to breathe through the screams as the transfer was completed. Just as sudden as it had risen, the pain vanished, leaving her doubled over on the floor, clutching the now darkly glowing crystal in her grasp.

"It's over, priestess…" Lucifer's tone gave no indication of emotion as he helped her back up, steadying her as she swayed on her feet.

"WOMAN, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

It took a moment before her sight corrected and her gaze focused on the origin of the infuriated sound. Finding herself face to face with the enraged Dark Fae king.

Mephistopheles's voice sounded like a snarl when he addressed their guest,"Dark King? What an unexpected surprise..."

Gwynn's voice was thunder. "Demon, BE GONE FROM HERE!"

In the next instant, Mephistopheles was gone, banished back to the depths of Hell at the Fae King's powerful command.

"Cool trick Gwynn… I need to invite you to more parties." And with that, the blackness would no longer be held back, and she plummeted into the gaping abyss.

When at last the darkness eased and her heavy lids obeyed her command to open, she found herself in the familiar surroundings of his chambers. Tucked away inside their bed... his bed. The Huntsman had taken her back to Tír na nÓg. How long had she been out for?

"At last you awaken." He gave her a small shake. "Why did you do this A' stór? I don't understand why you would see fit to condemn yourself."

"My time is up, Gwynn. Namtar is closing in, and the sin-eater is remembering. If there is any chance that he…" her voice cracked and broke. "I can't lose him again… don't ask it of me."

"Your husband is *dead*, Amara, you owe that demon *nothing*!" The crystal gave a plaintive crack under his grip.

"STOP!" She reached for her crystal, but he held back.

"My foolish girl, even I cannot fix this, there's no coming back from what you've done this time." His eyes blazed golden, anger such as she had seldom seen within him flooding their depths. "But we can minimize the damage. Entrust the crystal to me, and I'll hide it where neither man, immortal nor God can ever hope to lay claim upon it. Mo stór, you must realize by now that Asurim is dying, that realm has been drained of its life and can't be saved by your power alone. Leave them behind… save yourself."

"Gwynn, I can't."

"You must, to live you simply *must* cut them off. Stay with me in Tír na nÓg, let me protect you. The death god can't touch you as long as you remain hidden away in the darkness. It's your home. The sin-eater, the warlocks, the gargoyles, they don't deserve you. Accept my offer, Amara."

A strong compulsion to obey surged through her, her gaze drawn to the crystal in his hand. He could force her to accept. As long as he held the crystal, she would have no choice but to obey his commands.

"Don't do this Gwynn, don't force my will and make me hate you."

“There is no other way, little fool. You’ve forfeited your free will and your life with your reckless actions this day. I won’t force you, but I implore you to stay with me, and I’ll vow to keep you safe to the best of my abilities.” *‘As I’ve done for the past century’* was implied in his tone.

With care she plucked the crystal from his grasp, pressing her body into his when his grip upon it tightened, then relented as his arms moved to embrace her instead.

“You already made a vow Gwynn, we both did. Made promises neither of us can walk away from. I vowed to protect the sin-eater, I vowed on the memory of my Cassius. And you’ve bound yourself to a child, one who I pray will one day set you free from The Hunt.

“You would make her your Queen and consort and leave me to hide in the shadows? Don’t reduce me to a life imprisoned in the dark—I’ve already lived that life.”

His cheek brushed along her own, teasing her with the soft scrape short stubble. She knew then, that he’d been caught in his visions, only to hurry to her as soon as the cruel fates had seen fit to release his mind.

“It should’ve been me to free you from your imprisonment and win your heart. I would have treasured you, Amara.”

Her own fingers moved to close behind his nape, holding him close. “And it should’ve been me to set you free from The Hunt, free you from its curse. The gods are cruel, and fate has been unkind to us, for I think I would’ve enjoyed being yours. If I still had a heart to give, I would have given it to you Gwynn. I think I could’ve loved you...”

“You made me forget my curse in the moments we shared, I felt almost sane.”

“During my times with you, I felt almost whole again. However, ‘almost’ wasn’t good enough for you, Dark King. And now it’s no longer an option for me. The sin-eater is in danger from both Namtar and his own mind, and Asurim needs me. But you, you need your Queen at your side, not a distraction like me. Promise me you’ll find happiness Gwynn, and your freedom, for both our sakes.”

“It can’t end this way A’ stór.” He pressed a kiss to her lips, hungered and pleading. “We cannot end this way.”

His mouth moved over hers, the kiss frantic, desperate, and for the briefest of moments she melted to it before breaking the kiss, her fingers stroking along his cheek.

“Asbu shi, I fear we already have.”

72

IT'S WHAT WE IN THE BUSINESS CALL 'HISTORICAL NEGATIONISM'

He'd been poring over tome after tome, shut away in the archive rooms of the library, searching back through the history they had on warlocks. Births, deaths, marriages of note… records of slaves they'd held and contracts that had been made. At one time, warlocks lived under heel of the demons, their power diverted to the hells, doled out by the demons as they saw fit.

It had notably been Cass's first open act of rebellion against his father. He and Amara sacking the Nine Dominions, handing over the crown to her as rightful ruler — ending any unwanted ties to the Demonarchy. Mara, as promised, had set up temples to directly channel power to chosen archdeacons, diverting power from Asmodeus in the first minute step towards toppling his rule.

As far back as he searched, he found no mention of Amara's birth, no registers of her family at all, as though her generation had been fully expunged from their records. It was as though someone had scraped clean the history of the discord between their races, no mention of when the demons had become overlords to the warlocks, no reason why.

It had happened. He'd seen it for himself, and their tumultuous relationship still existed, there was still resentment, distrust… warlocks who still feared to call upon infernal magicks because they didn't want to owe fealty to a demon. These were facts, and there was no record in all of his father's extensive and notoriously meticulous ledgers. Which could

only mean it had been intentionally removed. Leaving Cass one name. Basileus.

As his father's Herald, Bas had every opportunity to re-write these books as Asmodeus saw fit, and none would've been the wiser, had Cass not been searching for the specific information that was missing.

He had one person who'd promised to answer him truthfully, whether the answer suited him or not. One person who would've been around during the times he had questions of. Who had been in direct opposition to Asmodeus through all of this. He had to speak to Levistus.

He left the library, marched down the hall and threw open Levistus's door. "Levistus, I…"

The man standing with Levistus, his gold hair glinting in the light… Azadiel — he hadn't realized he was Levistus's Herald. The demon was a power to be feared in his own right.

No. There was more…

Blood drained from his face, leaving him cold.

A memory gripped him so hard, his body lost all its strength…

He stumbled back out of the door, crashing against the wall.

His hands trembled as he held open the hell-gate, one large enough for him to stroll through. An impressive feat on its own since he was now fully six and a half feet tall.

He smiled proudly back at her, her expression full of awe as she leaned up against her bars.

"*Az taught me. It's called a hell-gate. He says I'm the only other one he's ever seen with the ability." He let the gate close, his body trembling from the exertion of keeping it open. "Not even my father can summon them. Though… he doesn't need to since he can summon all the Hells* to *him."*

He sat on the floor, as close as he could press to her, sliding his hand through the bars, her hand grasping his.

"*Do you think it'll work?" she asked, her voice full of* hope.

For once.

His chest filled with pride. He'd given her that.

He would never disappoint her. They'd been working toward this for far too long.

"*Soon it'll be strong enough to break through the magick of your cell." He sighed, leaning his forehead against the bars. "I've been practicing*

every day. Hiding away in my room so they don't see."

"Don't…" she said, swallowing hard and leaning her forehead on the bars across from his, "let him catch you. I'm scared for what he'd do."

"I've been careful. Az says I'm learning quick." He picked up her hand, grasping it tightly. "I can't wait to hold you." He just knew their bodies would fit together as though made for one another.

They'd grown together like this, separated by bars but attached in every way that mattered. Together they were everything.

"Soon," she sighed, grasping his hand tightly, "we can be together. Free."

He turned his hand, pressing their palms together and lacing his fingers through hers.

"And then you'll be my wife."

She was devastatingly beautiful when she smiled.

A new scene emerged, his chest full of panic instead of air.

He held her hand tight, holding her up and nearly dragging her. She was fast, but his longer strides were eating up far more ground. He shouldn't have stopped to kiss her.

"As I give you my hand to hold, so I give you my life to keep."

It had been everything he'd ever dreamed it would be.

No time for that.

It wouldn't be long until he, at least, would be missed.

They'd have plenty of time for that when they were safe. Then he could show her… everything.

"Blood of my blood and bone of my bone, I give myself to you body and soul so two might be one."

When they were children, they promised to save themselves for each other — that promise had been taken from him, beyond his control to keep. He had been too young to understand what he'd have to do to survive. But it had never meant anything. That was for her.

The portal was in sight.

He felt the surge of excitement, wanted to pick up speed, but she was already faltering, not used to this much physical exertion.

"It's there, amata. Can you see it?" He turned to her, pulling her closer so he could support her if she fell. She really was at the end of her limits…

"Cass…" she moaned, slowing their pace and clinging to his arm.

He turned to see what she was looking at and saw them.

He stopped completely, pushing her to the ground as he called up the hell-flames, surrounding them in a protective circle. The cord. He had to hide the cord…

The flames sputtered, dying completely when he saw the third figure walking out from behind his father and Basileus.

Azadiel.

His friend. Their mentor—

Betrayal hit him like a boot to the chest, deflating him.

He tucked assat-shi to his chest, hugging her head to him.

Why?

Azadiel had been preparing him for this moment, teaching him—encouraging him—

Why?

He shook himself out of his mind, fury consuming him, wings flaming to life at his back as he lunged for the betraying fuck.

"The wings are new," Azadiel said, tilting his head with a smirk right before Cass plowed into him.

"Why?" Cass roared, throwing the demon against the wall, his arm barring across his neck.

"You remember the bad parts, but not all I did for you?" Azadiel gasped out.

"You set me up. Turned us over to my father. I should rip your head from your neck." Dizziness swamped his brain and his grip loosened. "Mara?" It had been her. Unmistakably.

"Release me." Azadiel's voice boomed with power, and Cass couldn't resist the order. The *demon* was using a *celestial* voice of power.

A burst of power caught him up, slamming him against the wall on the opposite side of the hall.

Azadiel walked forward with menacing steps. "You forget who you're dealing with. Even your father dared not cross me."

"I forgot *everything*!" Cass roared out. Azadiel flinched, though his magick never waned.

Levistus placed his hand on Azadiel's shoulder, pulling him back and Cass felt the magick ease.

"He's remembering, Aza. We'll have to prepare for the fallout." Levistus smiled sadly then turned to Cass. "My Herald acted for your own interests, Cassius. The big picture. Remember that, at least."

“Nothing good came out of that,” Cass hissed low. “I may not remember all, but I remember the pain. They took her from me. I remember being destroyed. I remember *her* pain, and that’s on *you*.”

He turned and stalked down the hall, leaving them murmuring to one another.

Azadiel. He didn’t lie, emotions were beginning to surface. He remembered feeling safe with the demon. He remembered Azadiel’s pride. For him. He’d been proud of Cass at one point. He’d cared for him at one point.

How had he so utterly forgotten their past? Why was he just left with the terrible remnants of the pain of it all?

He’d forgotten her.

And she had been everything.

He detoured through his bedroom, holding up his hand to Jez when the angel started to climb out of bed. Dravite raised her brows and settled her hand on Jez’s arm.

He tore open a hell-gate with all the gut churning fury that was flowing through his veins.

Right into her bedroom.

Woe betide anyone who was in there with her.

She stood in silhouette, surrounded by blazing hearth-flames, tracing her finger around the rim of her glass, shoulders slumped inwards. For a moment, she looked sad. Then he stepped through the portal and her entire body tensed, her chin notching in that regal tilt she pulled off so well.

His Priestess.

He stepped close enough so she was out of the shadow. Her eyes were wary. She looked… tired.

His anger washed out of him completely.

Everything washed out of him.

He’d failed her.

He dropped to his knees in front of her, wrapping his arms around her waist, pressing his cheek to her belly.

He needed to know if it was her. Had he broken promises to the one person who had stood fast by his side for the past century—and when?

“Are you ever going to tell me?” His voice cracked, and he realized he had tears streaming down his face. “Mara, I need to know.”

Her eyes shone with the reflection of the flames, her fingertips tracing over his eyebrow, then down the side of his face, as he just took it in, leaning into her gentle touch. Trying to reconcile that memory with his reality.

It couldn't be Mara.

He'd released her from her cell just over a century ago. They hadn't run together. No one had tried to stop him.

He hadn't promised to marry her.

Yet a voice inside of him which refused to be silenced insisted the memory was true.

He turned his face back into her belly, hugging her tight to him.

He didn't know what was reality, only knew that everything inside of him insisted that she was his. They were bound together by ritual, that was fact, her sigil warmed his chest. His soul insisted they were bound far deeper.

Her fingers pushed into his hair, running through it, soothing him.

He should be the one comforting her.

He'd failed her.

He looked up and met her eyes, her pain showing clearly as her thumb brushed the wetness off his cheeks.

The pain in her eyes…

A memory struggled to surface, churning up bile in its wake.

He groaned, shot to his feet and ran to her toilet.

He fought it. Couldn't remember. Didn't want to.

He heaved, his stomach clenching, nothing coming up.

She wasn't going to tell him. Behind the pain in her eyes, there had been knowledge.

His mind cleared, focusing on that instead of the memory that his mind was fighting to keep repressed.

She was his. He knew it with an undeniable instinct. They'd promised themselves to each other and she wasn't going to tell him?

She was okay with him going through life not remembering that she had been everything? Savior to the broken boy. She'd given him a reason to fight. A reason to be strong. Everything he'd become had been for her.

He growled and got back to his feet, running his hands down his face. He turned on the cold water in the sink, splashing it on his face, then cupping his hands and drinking down gulps of it.

He stormed back into the bedroom, grabbed her by the waist and spun her, pressing her against the wall as he closed off every gap of space that parted them.

“You made promises to me. You’re mine.” He kissed her lightly. “I’m yours. I promised to make you my wife? My consort — deny it!”

She pressed a finger to his lips; her face contorted into fury of her own.

“It’s too late for that sin-eater.” He nipped the tip of her finger and she snatched it back. “It’s better if you don’t remember.”

“And that’s for you to decide?” Anger burned. More of a background noise, insinuating itself into everything else that he was feeling.

“The choice wasn’t mine Cass, it was made for us...”

“My Mara. You were everything.”

His thumb pressed against her bottom lip, briefly testing its plumpness before hooking his finger under her chin to tilt her face up to his.

“That’s all I need to remember.”

His mouth crashed to hers, wide open, devouring. He was giving no quarter. She was his. Her hands gripped his waist, pulling him hard against her. He groaned, light-headed with pleasure.

His hand trailed down from the back of her neck, across her collarbone, her breathy gasps urging him on, he cupped her breast, his thumb flicking over her beaded nipple before moving down, parting her robes, over the flare of her hip, his fingertips tracing the top of her mound.

He’d craved this forever.

His heart was pounding, his hand shaking, their mouths devouring one another. It wasn’t enough. Their teeth bumped, hands grasping at each other, frantic with need.

His finger parted her folds, and they groaned into each others’ mouths. This was the only truth he needed. He pushed his finger into her sheath, nearly spilling in his pants. So wet. Hot. Her nails dug into his sides. He pushed in another finger dragging them back slowly, eating up her moans with his mouth.

This was where he belonged.

“Fools!” Levistus yelled. “Bloody stupid fools.” He burst through a portal and Amara’s eyes widened, her hands grasping her robe together.

Cass pulled his fingers out slowly, watching her mouth part with a silent gasp, her eyes growing heavy once more. She watched him as he

brought his hand to his mouth, sucking her juices off his fingers, slowly. Savoring.

Her cheeks flushed, and she whimpered softly, pressing her hand to the wall to brace herself.

He was ripped off her, thrown against the wall, Levistus red-faced and snarling.

All he could see was her.

Cass's eyes gleamed, his mouth twitching up in a grin as he watched her try to compose herself. She was his, and she knew it.

"Of all the fucking idiotic things." Levistus was still blustering, giving Cass a shake.

Levistus turned, his glower focused on Amara, her chin tilted up as she glared back. Cass saw the faint tremble in her chin, and his heart cracked.

"You should know better, Priestess. You risk everything!"

Her eyes tore up something inside of him, pleading, her expression flashing with something akin to… grief? He knew then, that he was hers too.

He would set the Realms on fire and lay them at her feet if she were to ask.

"No." Levistus threw his arms into the air, pacing. "Just stay apart. The two of you will be the death of each other." He gave Mara a meaningful gaze and grabbed Cass's arm.

"Come, Cassius. You are going to have a chat with Azadiel." Levistus tugged at him.

Amara gasped audibly, and Cass looked over his shoulder, concern knitting his brows, but she was no longer facing him.

"I'll be back Mara," he called out, letting Levistus drag him along.

"Don't," she whispered.

He heard it.

Tried to pretend it didn't crush his heart.

73

WHO YOU CALLING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

HIS USUAL SINGLE GLASS OF PORT HAD TURNED INTO THE ENTIRE BOTTLE. He was enjoying the lassitude, his thoughts numb, body uncaring. Less potent than the oblivion of poison, but then, he was expecting company.

He uncorked his second bottle from the lineup on his side table, eyes turning from his blackened hearth long enough to make sure the liquid hit the glass, then turned back to staring at the designs in the soot.

He tensed when he felt hands on his shoulders.

"My lord," Leira's soft voice jarred his thoughts, "Cassius. Let me ease you."

Anger hit sharply to his gut. He just wanted some fucking peace. He didn't want another woman. He wanted what was his.

"Leave me," he kept his tone low, but the menace leaked through.

Her hands tightened on his shoulders and he let out a warning growl.

"Have I offended you?" Her hands dropped, and by the waver in her voice, he knew she was making that face. All big eyes and quivering chin.

He was not in the mood.

"I don't want you here." The words came out, harsher than he'd intended. She sucked in a breath. "Just leave me to be alone," he softened his tone, trying to appease her hurt.

"*She* gets to stay?" Leira hissed.

She was talking about Dravite. He'd left Jez and the warlock cocooned behind his bed curtains, flipping through a large book of poetry. He wasn't fit for company.

“That’s none of your concern.” He snorted, lifting his glass to his lips and draining it again.

He still felt her presence. He finally turned to her and snarled.

“Fucking leave,” he shouted, making a move to stand, and she bolted from the room, shoving through Levistus and Azadiel who were standing in the doorway.

They were a study in contrast, Levistus with his black hair and even darker eyes, constant scowl affixed on his pale face, next to the sun bright golden skin and hair of his Herald, Azadiel. Where Levistus burned hot with suppressed rage, Azadiel was cold and remote as a dead star, his pale blue eyes observing and showing no emotion.

“Now you’re making the ladies cry?” Levistus slowly approached, his eyes going to the bottle lying empty at Cass’s feet and the one that was currently refilling his glass.

Azadiel stood back, leaning against the door frame, eyes eating Cass up, taking in every nuance of his expression, likely figuring out that Cass was intentionally avoiding his gaze. Avoiding everything he stood for, really. Memories that couldn’t possibly exist — *because they weren’t rooted in any of the reality he knew.* At that thought, Cass shot back another glassful.

Levistus made himself comfortable on the floor beside Cass’s chair, giving the bottle a good spin as he crossed his legs, watching the glass go from the table to Cass’s mouth.

“How long are you planning to be at that?” Levistus asked, raising a brow.

Cass shrugged, swirling the liquid around his glass before shooting it back.

“Kind of like this feeling,” Cass said with a sigh. “Maybe I’ll stay drunk.”

Levistus brought up a knee, resting his arm across it, spinning the empty bottle again with his other.

“You’ll rot your brain.”

Cass scoffed. “You mean what’s left of it?”

His hand shook when he went to refill the glass.

“It was never your mind that was affected,” Levistus spoke quietly, studying him.

“Maybe I should summon her.” He clasped both hands around the glass, and Levistus stilled. “I wonder what she’s wearing.”

“Cassius, stop and think…” Levistus warned.

“Maybe she’s coated in the blood of her sacrifices like some decadent pagan goddess.” Cass shifted, running the heel of his palm down his cock.

Azadiel finally came forward, crouching in front of him, resting his arms across his knees. “How much do you remember?”

Like this, looking into Azadiel’s eyes, it was like viewing a slick mirage coating his life as he knew it. Gloss and cheap veneer covering up some major ugly. Then he blinked, and it was gone.

He leaned forward until he was nearly nose to nose with Azadiel. “How much was taken from me?” Azadiel blinked first and Cass’s lips twisted up into a smug grin. “Where are the pages that are missing from our histories?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Azadiel shifted his eyes to Levistus and sat back on his heels.

Cass went in for the kill. “How long was Amara in the dungeons?” He shook his head, refilling his glass. “How long was she my father’s prisoner?”

Azadiel swiped the glass from his hand and slammed it onto the side table. “Long enough… stop prodding your brain for memories, Cassius. It’s barely stable and you’ll have it all crashing in on itself.”

“Is it going to destroy me?” He leaned back and clasped his hands over his stomach.

“Likely,” Levistus answered, turning so his back was resting against the sofa and he was staring at the same empty blackened hearth as Cass.

“Will it destroy her?” Cass squeezed his eyes closed at the ache in his chest.

“Cassius, you’ve seen her—it already is.” Levistus dropped his head back against the arm of the chair, his eyes closed, lost to memories.

“I’ll stop,” he said, blowing out a slow breath. “I just need to know…”

“I’ll tell you what I can without damaging anything further, but you must stop pushing.” Azadiel settled on the sofa beside him, picking up a glass and filling it. “I need to know how much you’ve remembered thanks to Jareth’s meddling.”

“I remember throwing up the hell-flames.” Cass looked up from his glass, holding his gaze. “I remember her trembling with fear in my arms. I

remember being so close to freedom I could taste it.” With a snarl, he tossed his glass against the hearthstone, watching shattered crystal rain down. “I remember our first kiss. Do you know how long we both waited for that? How right it felt? Like the answer to the universe could be found within each other—”

He sniffled, angrily swiping his sleeve across his face.

Azadiel focused on the glass in his hand, drawing Cass’s eye to the rainbows the candlelight were lighting up in the crystal. “All the two of you needed to do was have patience. Levistus and I worked tirelessly lining up everything that needed to be aligned, and you nearly toppled it all.” Azadiel finally met his eyes. “You did end up setting us back centuries. Nearly lost your life. Nearly cost her hers.” His voice lowered to a whisper, “and it may yet come to that.”

“Just tell me if it was her. My Mara—we’ve always had a connection.” Cass reached around him and grabbed the bottle, drinking straight from it. “Least I’ve always felt it.”

Azadiel shook his head. “I can’t answer that. I know how much your father took from you. He kept you mindless for centuries, a slave to your power. I do hope you don’t recall those years, they had nothing to do with who you are.”

Cass watched him from the side of his eyes, taking another long swallow as he processed the possible meaning of his words.

“You weren’t powerful enough to escape him for long.” Levistus hung his head, shaking it sadly. “Though Aza raved about your aptitude for wielding the infernal magicks. By all the Hells Cassius, you could call up the hell-flames before you were fully grown.”

“Could I?” Cass asked, his tone sharp. “Because I had no idea I could do that until I remembered that night.”

Levistus pressed his fingers to his eyes. “If you’d just been patient—Aza fought me on that, he wanted to act swiftly,” Levistus turned and nodded at Azadiel, “but the pieces weren’t lined up. Your allies weren’t ready, and you weren’t even powerful enough to release me, Asmodeus was always ten steps ahead of us… Azadiel was always as reckless as you are. Probably where you picked that up.”

He was already sad he threw his glass away. “You’re telling me my very personality was influenced by someone I don’t remember?”

Azadiel jerked back and turned his face.

Levistus's nostrils flared, and he offered Cass the bottle back. "Can you say you remember all of your father's teachings? Yet his influence is clearly stamped on you."

Cass lowered the bottle, swallowed his mouthful and passed the bottle back. "I remember the painful ones. Suppose he was right about those ones sticking."

"We knew one day you'd be powerful enough to overthrow him." Levistus gazed meaningfully at his Herald. "I'm not sure how you managed without an all-out war, yet here we are."

"Yep. Mara and I, without *your* help." Cass's head was spinning. Perhaps he preferred the poison, after all, less sneak-up-on-a-person. "And now here I am, without my consort. Without my memory. Not even sure what all I'm capable of. We're in a great spot here."

Levistus smirked. "You're slurring your words." He chugged back the port and set the bottle down. "Can't we just move forward from here?"

"I'll track down your missing histories, Cass, but I'm not sure how much more I can answer without doing permanent damage." Azadiel patted Cass's thigh and stood, placing his glass on the side table and heading through the door without looking back. Not even waiting for Cass to respond.

Jez knelt before him, tugging on his arms. "Come sleep this off, drunky."

"Leave me," Cass spoke in a jumbled slur. "I'm killing my heart and I don't deserve a bed."

Jez laughed loudly. "Lord love us you're a mess."

Cass opened one bleary eye. "What if I don't remember?" His heart pounded at the thought. "Maybe I'd go insane. Then I could just be drunk all the time."

"You can't handle your drink, demon. Obviously." Jez threw Cass's arm over his shoulder.

"Where'd Levistus go?" He spun out of Jez's grip to look around the room.

"He says he'll bring Azadiel back when you've returned to your senses." Jez grabbed his arm, steering him back toward the bed.

"I don't want my senses back."

"Now Cassius, what would your Priestess think of you getting yourself in this state?" Dravite leaned over him, pressing a cool cloth to his

forehead.

Cass flinched back from her touch.

“Don’t touch me.” He held his hands up in front of his face.

“Cass she’s trying to help,” Jez said from over his head. Cass realized he was laying across the angel’s lap.

“No one can touch me but her.” He sighed, closing his eyes and relaxing once more. “Assat shi. *My wife.*”

He felt Jez’s body stiffen, but his eyes wanted to stay closed.

“You remember something?” Jez hissed in his ear.

“Love,” he mumbled sleepily. “I think I loved her.”

“Dravite...” Jez said, “you best respect his wishes. He said he didn’t want to be touched.”

“Sarrum-sa?” Her voice was hesitant as if the general were weighing her words carefully. “Understand there is nothing my Sarratum would not do to protect you…”

Cass had no idea who she was talking to, her voice distorted, his mind no longer caring.

74

ONE LITTLE BITE

ALL WERE REJOICING IN TODAY'S OFFERING, SHE OUGHT TO BE AS WELL, energy had been harvested which would help sustain the realm, yet she was left feeling numb. While descending the podium to leave the acolytes to clean up, she stretched her stiffened neck and shoulders, easing her robes over blood soaked skin. Both the discomfort and melancholy soon to be eased by two fingers' worth of fire whiskey and a hot bath.

With that prospect firm in mind, Amara hurried through the parting sea of worshipers, coming to a reluctant stop only when sensing the imprint of a familiar presence.

"The General has returned."

Mere moments later Dravite's form stepped through the ornate doors of the temple hall, her posture straight, her head held high. Even dressed in layers of filmy organza and covered in head to toe in shimmering jewels there was no mistaking her for anything other than a veteran warrior and commander of war battalions. In all her feminine beauty, the General radiated power and strength.

"Sarratum-sa."

As was customary, her General dropped onto her knee before Amara in a public display of reverence. A tactical move, the gesture serving as a public display of both dominance and loyalty. Her father had shown weakness and through that, he'd been betrayed and Asurim had fallen, Amara would apply every trick in the book to ensure history wouldn't repeat itself.

“Welcome home Er-Dravite, you’ve been expected.”

The hall was filled with people, meaning there would be little privacy to talk, she was chilled and tired was in no mood to hold an audience. With a small nod of her head, she gestured for her general to follow, swiftly making their way along the firelit corridors in silence, eager to be away from curious eyes and ears. As soon as they crossed the threshold to her private chambers and closed the heavily warded doors, she released a pent-up sigh of relief.

“Sarratum, may I speak frankly?”

With a dismissive gesture, Amara waved her general further into the chambers and towards the divan while she made her way to her bathing chambers. Her self promised bath would need to wait, but she was covered in blood. *Filthy*.

“I would be pleased if you did.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Dravite fidgeting, the gesture unusual for the steadfast general.

“I would like to know the price that was paid for Agate’s freedom. She’s my sister, and I’m grateful, but it is we who are bound to serve *you*. If her ambition has placed you in Mephistopheles’s debt, then I shall have failed in my duty as your protector.”

Her steps faltered at Dravite’s words, her head peeking from the doorway of the bathing chamber to quirk her brow in the direction of her general.

“Your sister followed her natural given instinct to secure a better position in society for you both, and she did so at a heavy price. Her actions brought you both to me, and as such, I too benefit from Agate’s sacrifice. I may not possess many virtues, but I insist on paying the debts I owe. Nothing more needs to be said on the matter.”

A glance down had her grimacing at her blood coated hands before Amara once again disappeared into the bathing chamber, finding a basin readied with warm water and soap. As was the routine when a bath wasn’t an immediate option she washed her hands and face with heavy soap, then glared at the result. Over the years the blood of her victims had colored her hands a faded shade of red, the stain persisting no matter how vigorously she scrubbed.

With a scowl she abandoned the effort, she would again settle for dipping her fingers in a dark dye later, maybe even paint her nails a bright

gold for good measure. The concept wasn't new, many of the temple acolytes already used henna dye to paint wards and runes upon their skin before ceremonies, the effect both sensual and powerful.

When finally returned to the seating area, she was amused to find her general struggling to sit straight while nearly being swallowed up whole by the overstuffed cushions of the divan.

"Please Dravite be at ease, I've welcomed you to my chambers as my guest, not my servant. There is much we have to discuss."

A multitude of small serving trays had been placed upon the table, offering selections of ripened fruits, fresh vegetables, meats, and cheeses imported from the lush realm of Naidra. Next to the trays sat a basket of freshly baked bread, the rich scent wafting through the chamber, tempting the appetite.

"I see my sister hasn't surrendered yet."

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips at the mention. It'd become Agate's self-proclaimed mission to see Amara gain some physical strength and weight, and despite years of failure, her attendant remained steadfast in her efforts.

"Er-Agate cares for me well, despite my efforts in being a vexing charge."

Having been a prisoner when frozen into immortality had impacted some of her physical development, but overall she couldn't complain. Agate was a genius with fabrics and knew just how to fasten her robes and chains to enhance the modest curves of her body.

Daily ingestion of glamour tinctures successfully concealed the scars marring her face and back, compliments of the goons who had tormented her by pelting sharp rocks into her cell. The day she met Cass had also been the last time they had ever bothered her. Over the years she'd asked a few times, yet he never revealed what'd become of them.

Applications of kohl, powders, and balms darkened her lids and tinted her lips, while transfiguration oils altered her silvered hair to whichever shade fit her mood that day. The overall effect of her appearance startling and exotic, carrying no similarities to that girl locked away in her cell, except for the eyes.

Moving for the dresser she ignored the serving trays and reached for a bottle of fire whiskey instead, her other hand collecting two crystal tumblers from the bar.

“Looks like a liquid diet is all the rage these days.”

Pouring a healthy serving into both glasses she offered one to her general, then raised her own in salute before draining its sweet contents.

“Unlike food, alcohol comforts more than just the belly.”

A moment of comfortable silence stretched between them as she reveled in the slow burn that spread through her throat and chest. The quiet in the room broken when said burn reached her belly and her stomach unleashed a loud rumble in protest. The sound mimicking the call of an animal in distress and earning her a poignant stare from her general, which she chose to ignore.

“Speaking of food, why is the sin-eater not feeding? I can sense him weakening, the power of the Nessus has been waning.”

Today’s sacrifices had been a hurried affair, sloppy but necessary. A tribute to the gods hastily arranged as to draw attention away from the additional offerings being made to the Nessus.

“He won’t let anyone close enough, Sarratum, he refuses to be touched by any female who isn’t his assat. He is remembering, his mind is crumbling, I fear it won’t be long until the King discovers what is buried beneath the ruins of his former self.”

With a loud crash, Mara’s tumbler shattered apart amidst the blazing fire inside the hearth, the flames quick to envelop the fragments and consume the remaining drops of whiskey.

“It’s happening too fast... there is too much to do still.”

She hadn’t even noticed Dravite move until she returned to the divan carrying two plates, both piled with an absurd amount of food.

Only after her stomach churned out another pitiful growl did Amara relent and admit to hunger, taking a spot in the divan next to Dravite before accepting her offering.

“All of it…” Dravite’s voice was stern.

“Half of it.” Mara’s tone was stubborn.

After a few bites, Mara set the plate aside, her general forced to concede upon hearing her defeated sigh. “How am I supposed to protect him from this?”

Dravite’s warm fingers closed over her own icy cold ones, the gesture unexpected and oddly comforting. “The visions cause him to become physically ill, maybe something can be done about that?”

A slow nod was her only reply.

“Last night,” Dravite began softly, “in his drunken ramblings,” she smirked to herself then looked up to meet Amara’s pleading gaze, “he told Jez and I that he remembers… love. He remembers what it felt like to love her—*you*.”

A chill took her entire body causing a fine tremble in her hands. Love, without a soul? The concept was wholly improbable.

“That’s impossible.”

I’ll take from you all those who are foolish enough to love you

“Sarratum, if I may be so bold.” Dravite hesitated, her hand tightening on Amara’s frozen one. “Why would you not take what pleasure you can get with the demon, with what time the two of you have? What could it possibly hurt to take what you both desire more than anything? Maybe it would help ease his mind and bring him some peace”

“But what if it doesn’t?”

After what could’ve been minutes, or possibly hours, Dravite’s fingers released her hand, placing something within it. Looking down, she found a missive, instantly annoyed when recognizing the insignia upon the wax seal, *Levistus*.

With a quick cut, the seal was broken, her eyes scanning over the sparse few lines written upon the parchment.

“Priestess, time is running short and we are out of options.
I know what poison you hold in your inventory.
Use it and make him forget.
L”

A wave of nausea claimed her, and she crumpled the note in a too-tight grip. Now she knew the reason the demon prince had gone savage on her chambers, he had likely done a full inventory of the magicks she kept stored.

Just because she could alter the sin-eater’s mind, didn’t mean she would. There weren’t many acts Amara herself shied away from to achieve her objectives, and there was little she wouldn’t do to secure the sin-eater’s safety, but what Levistus demanded was an act of sacrilege. Much like his father, she would be robbing the demon not only of his memories but also his free will. She was up in an instant and pacing the length of her chambers.

“How dare the old goat make such a demand of me?”

Cassius would accept whatever she offered him without question, the act a breach of trust she couldn’t reconcile. Yet Levistus was correct in his observation, time was running short. They needed time to negotiate a trade for the crystal without Namtar growing alert to the plan, this took time. The one luxury they didn’t possess.

“Tell me Dravite, what is your impression of Prince Levistus?”

Her general contemplated the question as she drained the contents of her glass.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that his loyalty is perhaps not towards the King, but rather his own goals. He’s after something, and won’t stop until it’s been achieved. I suspect that to someone like En-Levistus collateral damage is no deterrent.”

“You believe he considers the Demon King collateral damage?”

“Not just the King, Sarratum-sa.”

Relenting her pacing Amara moved for the black lacquer curio cabinet which dominated the corner of her workspace. Plucking a skeleton key from an inconspicuous-looking box upon the workbench, before unlocking the center panels.

“Levistus seeks revenge against Asmodeus, in that we are equal. I suspect it’s in our methods of achieving that goal, demon prince and I will find ourselves incompatible as allies.”

The doors swung open with a soft creak, followed by the clinking of glass. Within she kept an extensive collection of bottles, vials, and jars, each containing a concentration of poisons or potions more potent than the previous. Each concoction a result of dark magicks, and capable of causing great harm when implemented correctly.

The General hissed under her breath at the imprint of their potency now tangible in the air, causing Mara to glance at her over her shoulder, noting how Dravite’s eyes instantly lowered to the floor to give no further insult. She could easily understand the reaction.

“You fear that I’ll hand you one of these poisons to give to Cassius. If this was my order, would you hesitate?”

Dravite couldn’t possibly know that her move would be guided by her general’s answer. This was the level of trust she placed in her general and her attendant, a novelty — and a comfort.

“I would hesitate Sarratum-sa, only because what you ask would go against my orders. You tasked me to protect and care for him as if I were protecting and caring for you. As such I would drink the contents of any of those vials myself before letting even a drop of it touch your lips, I can sense the malevolent energy embedded within some of those vials even at this distance.”

“What if it was a cruelty for the sake of kindness?”

“With all due respect Sarratum-sa, would you wish for such an act of kindness? Would Sarrum-sa wish for it?”

Sarrum—her would-be king and consort. The word caused a painful lurch within her chest, a singular seizure that nearly knocked the breath from her.

Her Cassius, Asurim’s rightful King, was dead. It was the sin-eater who lived. Dravite failed to make the distinction between the two.

After a moment she picked up a vial containing the mind-altering potion Levistus’s note had referred to. She traded her eyes for the heart of a cherubim, and from it had carefully brewed the mind-altering tonic. She’d meant it for herself but had never been able to bring herself to drink it.

“I’ve wished for such mercy every single day for four centuries.” The only reason she had held off was because she had one greater longing than peace—*vengeance*.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep, cleansing breath, and forced herself to make amends with her choice she made as her fingers closed around the neck of a small bottle.

“In some things, we are merely given the illusion of a choice. Deliver this to the sin-eater for me.” She moved for her escritoire and quickly wrote down a few lines, not bothering to seal the message. “Afterwards, report back to Prince Levistus, and be sure to give him this.”

At her nod, Dravite’s curious gaze flew over the scribbled words upon the parchment, the general’s lips curling in appreciation while reading.

Prince of Secrets,

Try forcing my hand again and I shall consider our truce at an end. Should this happen, I’ll collect your head at my earliest convenience and have your skull delivered to the prison realm for Asmodeus to use as a chamber pot.

-A.

It was a few hours and drinks later that Amara was caught up on the events and intrigues of the Nessus. Dravite stepped through the portal to return, with missive and potion in hand. Repressing a soft groan she stepped into the cooled water of her bath, scrubbing at her skin till it was raw while her mind worked through the choice she had made.

If in consequence to her decision, she and the demon were to go up in flames, then perhaps, for a brief moment they would burn together. Maybe in her final moments, she would be afforded a glimpse of *her* Cassius before they were both consumed by fire. That thought almost made defeat bearable.

She lowered herself deeper into the bath, eased by the aroma of night blooming jasmine, a small smile curling the corner of her lips. The tincture she had given Dravite would help suppress any ailment he felt, his mind likely triggering panic attacks as a way to protect itself. But it carried a side effect, one sure to keep the old goat too busy to meddle in her affairs while looking after the sin-eater.

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HIGHEST HIGH TO THE LOWLIEST DEPTHS

"CASSIUS, WHY AREN'T YOU IN YOUR…" LEVISTUS STOPPED WALKING AS his eyes took in the office. "Throne room… what in all the hells are you doing?"

Cass moved a book from one pile to another, looking around in confusion. He rather thought it obvious what he was doing. Re-shelving his father's tomes, sorted alphabetically, by date and by use. It was taking him longer than he'd originally planned for because he'd had to read a few pages from each…

"No one has seen you for hours." Levistus shut the door behind him. "What are you doing?"

He'd lost it. Levistus had scattered his thoughts with his interruption, and he'd forgotten where he'd been. He sighed heavily, grinding his teeth in irritation.

"Is there something you needed?" Cass said, his jaw still clenched.

Right, he forgot he'd meant to relax.

"Yes. You're supposed to be assigning judgment today. In your throne room," Levistus said, eyeing him closely. "Are you on something?"

Cass rolled his head back along his neck, trying to ease the tension.

"Mara sent me something." He shrugged with feigned nonchalance, as though her name on his lips didn't cause his heart to race, his chest to fill close to bursting…

"Cassius," Levistus snapped, "are you going to be able to do this today?"

“She didn’t poison me.” A fleeting frown crossed his lips. “I guess I no longer deserve oblivion. My mind has never been so clear.”

He inhaled deeply, savoring a slow indrawn breath. Levistus’s mouth flattened, his hand gripping the door frame. Cass picked up on every nuance. His mind snagged on the fact that Levistus was looking irritated — but he didn’t care. He was busy.

Stupid kingly duties pulling him away from what he’d rather be doing. He could happily live in his library. With a longing look of regret, he patted the top of the stack, the leather volume soft and comforting. He swept past Levistus and out the door.

He felt like his seat was covered in nettles. *Everything* irritated. He watched the poor fucks lining up to seek an audience while bound by chains, awaiting sentencing. Cassius felt no less bound than they were, wishing he were anywhere other than confined to this throne.

He’d ended with the grimoires. G. Sorted by century.

“Your Highness, I’d like to plead for leniency on Winston’s behest.” A higher demon was before him, leading a younger one in chains. “He was unaware he was trespassing.”

Always with the trespassing. He was merely overlord of the Hells, the rule of each realm was left to the Archdeacons, he was only charged to clean up the messes that were out of jurisdiction, and the ones requiring serious punishment.

Cass held up his hand. Leniency to one meant leniency to all, and chaos would surely ensue. “Ignorantia juris non excusat,” he mumbled in Latin, “ignorance of the law excuses no one.”

“He’ll be kept from wandering, set to menial labor in punishment.”

“I’ll agree to this.” Cass leaned forward. “If he shows back up in my court, however, his punishment shall be twice as severe.” He waved them off.

He wondered if he should sort them by type of magick? Maybe he should give Mara some of his books. She could help him—it would give him an excuse to go see her. He tilted his head with sudden realization. Did he need an excuse? He was king.

“This one was caught raping a succubus,” Levistus whispered in his ear, snapping Cass to attention.

This was new. Normally, the Succubi were Mammon’s business. It must’ve been brutal for it to be brought up to his attention.

The demon in chains before him snarled. He had no one to speak for him and opened his own vile mouth.

“She fed off my pleasure,” the demon sneered. “We both got what we needed in the end.”

Without any forewarning, anger blasted through his senses. The wrongness of that statement burning through his mind, setting off pops and flashes of memories of his own degradation. As succubi she had likely needed sustenance, she needed to survive, the act shouldn’t come at the cost of her dignity.

“Did she then?” Cass hissed menacingly, tension prickling up his spine.

Levistus stiffened at his side, picking up on Cass’s building rage, some of the demonarchy in attendance were starting to back away slowly from the dais upon which his throne stood raised. The chained demon in question, however, seemed too obtuse to notice the peril his careless words had placed him and continued his foolish effort towards justifying his actions before his king.

“The others do it all the time.” The demon shrugged. “I just so happened to be caught in the act, so to say.” He smirked.

To be taken advantage of because of her very nature? Something unraveled in his memory, something violent surfacing from the depths. Before he could seize it, his mind slammed shut and he lost it. “NO!”

He jumped to his feet, throwing out his hands, expecting his wings to spring up as they’d been doing since his power had expanded —instead, a pillar of liquid flame shot up from the floor from where the demon… had been… standing.

The room went silent. All the ambient noise, gone. Not even the sound of breathing.

“Mammon just allows this?” Cass spun on Levistus.

“Calm yourself, son,” Levistus gritted out, his body still.

The sound of dishes dropping, glass shattering, buzzed through his head and he whipped back around to face the room. A red-faced serving lady held her hands pressed over her mouth.

“Be at ease,” Cassius’s voice carried across the room, he didn’t even have to raise it this time to be heard, the wagging tongues of the demonarchy silenced for once. “Clean up the mess. It’s okay. Ad otium.” She dropped to her knees, sweeping the mess into a hurried pile.

“Hellflames?” Cass asked Levistus, who gave him a solemn nod back. “I better… um…”

His thoughts cut off when he felt a terrible pain rip through his chest, stealing his breath. He recognized the energy imprint linked to his own — Jez. His herald suffered, something happened to him.

With a hurried motion, he grabbed for Levistus’s arm, gave it a quick squeeze, then bolted off down the hall, the Prince of Secrets following close at his heels.

“Jez!” His bellow filled the bedchamber as he threw open the heavy door. Then stumbled over his feet.

Jez sat on the bed, holding Dravite, rocking. Blood coated his shirt… his hair… the bed. She was still. There was nothing, no energy imprint he could pick up from the powerful Warlock General.

Her once pink lips were pale, her eyes sightless and unblinking, a ragged gash was torn across the back of her neck, Jez’s hand trying to hold it together. Blood still oozed out, pooling onto Jez’s lap.

“What have you done?” Levistus roared, reaching for someone, his view blocked from the figure his advisor was yelling at. Jez hadn’t done this, he was certain of this fact, for he could feel the agony roiling off his herald as if it were his very own. The loss nearly taking him to his knees, it felt devastatingly familiar.

Levistus shifted, clearing the field of view enough that he was able to see who his advisor was holding and shaking.

Leira.

What in all the hells had the wench done?

“Jez’Piel, it’s your right to claim her punishment.” Levistus’s voice was cold, the undertone of rage one he’d not heard in his advisor’s voice before.

Cassius understood, if fragile looking Leira had indeed somehow murdered the Warlock General, then the foolish girl had single-handedly endangered the truce between warlocks and demons.

Jez shook his head sadly, not looking up at either of them. “I can’t.”

“Just because you’re of Celestial origin, doesn’t mean you can’t right this wrong…” Levistus said, his cheeks ruddy with anger. “Her death must be avenged before the warlocks lay claim to it, the demonarchy will oppose their claim and war will be unavoidable.”

Jez’s body straightened, his arms tightening around Dravite’s lifeless body, uncaring that he was soaking up her blood.

“That’s not why. I wish I could…” the angel said, his voice hoarse.

Cass felt the shift in the air. Portal. His stomach clenched, turning over. Filled with butterflies… anticipation.

Amara jumped through, a scream of outrage on her lips, dark tendrils of smoke coiling around her, her magick and temper volatile. In that moment, at the sight of her anger, he knew the truth of his own masochism. She was all that was glorious. And very lethal.

With not a second to waste, Cass swept her up against him, holding her arms, her back pressed to his chest.

“Release me Cassius,” she growled, yet his name still sounded so sweet on her lips. How rarely she called him by his name.

“Mara.” He wrapped an arm around her waist to hold her tighter and buried his face in her hair. Instinct guiding his actions, knowing that somehow, as long as he held her, all would be okay.

“Amara.” Levistus nodded her way, his focus still on Leira. “You have more right than any of us, claim her life before it becomes public knowledge.”

“Why?” His lips brushed along the rapid pulse of throat, satisfied when Mara leaned into him ever so lightly. Pressing his cheek to her temple he held her close as he lifted his gaze to Leira, finding her staring back to them, the Erinyes’s expression stubborn and anything but contrite.

“Why?” He hardly recognized his own voice, nor the menace he could barely reign in.

“She threatened me,” Leira said, notching her chin.

“She did nothing of the sort!” Jez yelled, finally looking up from Dravite’s lifeless form within his arms. His face was pale, etched with the agony of loss.

He turned to Cass and Mara, who was still struggling in his arms, her sweet little ass wiggling against him…

“Dravite was just here, waiting for me to shower. She still had the book I gifted her in her hand,” Jez’s voice broke, his head dropping again. “She’s so cold...”

A pall of silence settled over the room.

Cass’s eyes followed an oozing trail of blood as it rolled down Dravite’s hanging arm, to the tip of her finger; the soft ticking of each

singular drop as it hit the book on the floor sounding off like a bomb blast in the silence between their breaths. Under the pooling blood upon the cover, he could read the title, a Romantic's passion, a collection of poems by Lord Byron.

His heart sank, for with that gift his herald had just declared himself in love with the lifeless woman he held cradled in his arms. He'd found happiness in Hell, only to have it ripped away from him.

Cass knew Mara had made the same discovery, he could feel her power build as it thrummed through her body, searing like a low voltage electrical current. Burning him so sweetly.

"Sin-eater, I'm not going to ask you again," Mara hissed, her voice carrying only as far as his ear. She demanded release but didn't push him, despite her threat she was asking for his blessing. She had it.

"She's all yours, Mara," he whispered against her hair. "Just not here."

"She was going to kill my baby!" Leira was still talking to Levistus. Cass's stomach plummeted as she looked directly at him. "Our baby."

His arms went numb, feeling the loss of Amara's power and heat as he dropped her then stumbled back, nearly falling when the backs of his knees hit his chair.

"No. Not possible." He grabbed Amara's hand, pulling her close. His lifeline, his anchor. "Mara I never missed a dose." Her hand was so cold. As cold as his insides felt.

He noted how her enigmatic eyes had grown suspiciously glassy for a brief moment, before she blinked, growing emotionless once more. Her fingers brushed over his mouth, and he swore he could feel sorrow and loss in that touch, the slightest tremble which rocked him to his core. He shook his head, looking her in the eyes.

"No…"

No. my children are meant to be born from her.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He had no idea where that thought came from. This was not his fault. There was no way it could be his…

Our children will have your eyes, assat shi

Only if they have your smile, vir meus

Amara stepped beyond his reach, not stopping until she stood directly in front of Leira, her hand gripping her jaw and turning her face up. She dropped it just as quickly, stepping back and turning back to Cass.

He could then see eyes the shock and sorrow in her eyes when they again met his.

“I can sense Ostara’s blessing upon her…”

He didn’t catch the rest of her words, white noise filling his ears as fell into the chair, his knees finally giving out.

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ONCE UPON A DREAM

SHE DISCOVERED LONG AGO THAT DISASTER AND TRAGEDY TRAVELED HAND in hand.

Tragedy had struck when a sudden jolt had ripped her essence back from the ether to slam back into her body and into consciousness.

At first, she feared someone had breached the Inner Sanctum and attacked her. Then her mind's eye flooded with fragments of chaotic images, blood, a blade, a bed and… a book of poems. She could feel a link snap apart as darkness swallowed up a familiar flame, it's magical imprint burning out. And she knew General Dravite was dead.

Then disaster then soon followed.

"I can sense Ostara's blessing upon her, she carries your heir in her womb."

All who were present within the Herald's bedchambers fell silent at the announcement, all except for Leira, whose soft little sobs somehow managed to sound both pitiful and disingenuous. Probably due to that poorly hidden glint of triumph visible within those overly large eyes.

Levistus stood beside the demoness, his punishing hold of earlier having turned into a protective embrace, his stern expression now one of calculation. True to character, the Prince of Secrets was already thinking of ways he could use this new development to his advantage.

She couldn't see the expression on Jez'Piel's face. The herald kept his head buried within the length of Dravite's ebony braids, holding her close.

Heartbreak. She knew the sight and feel of it, and mourned for the angel as much as for her own general.

This was Hell, and to Amara's knowledge, no one had ever found happiness within the viper's nest which was the Nessus. And she'd sent her General here while knowing the dangers of this accursed place.

I'm sorry Dravite...

Uncharacteristically caught up in the sentiment of remorse, she didn't realize her power had grown volatile until magick whirled out of her control, and manifested. Dark tendrils coiled around the Erinyes, ripping Leira free from Levistus embrace and lifting her up in air, presenting her as an offering to its mistress. Leira's heeled feet kicked out helplessly when Amara's fingers closed around her throat, the demoness' claws were much larger than her own, their sharp tips ripping into the skin of her fingers as she tried to break free. The more the Leira struggled, the more the pressure against her windpipe increased.

And though her claws appeared mortal-like when compared to those of the pureblood demoness, unlike Leira, Amara knew where to strike. With practiced ease, she found the steady flow of Leira's jugular vein beneath her grip and laid it open.

"AMARA, STOP!"

"Did Dravite not tell you what would happen should you ever presume to give me orders again? Final warning. Stay out of this, old man."

The body within her grip was growing limp, her struggle faltering as blood continued to pour freely down Leira's body, splashing upon basalt stone. Pouty lips were tinted blue, and silvery eyes had grown bloodshot, nearly bulging out of their sockets from the pressure she continued to apply above the cut. The demoness' lips parted on a desperate plea.

"Cassius, help… I love..." Leira's words came in broken pants.

"If you're just going to waste your final breath by telling a fib, then I suggest you might as well save it, little Leira," Amara's tone was icy cold.

"Cassius, think of your heir!" Levistus voice was tinged with anger. "Fools, for once think this through, producing an heir will secure our hold upon the throne."

"Amara, release her, please. You'll regret this action once your anger settles, it's a child of Cassius." No one had noticed Azadiel's entrance with all the focus on the tension in the room, his voice distinguished by the lack

of scorn or accusation in his tone. Instead, it almost sounded as if the demon lord had spoken to her with… understanding.

Her gaze turned towards the demon with whom she had refused to speak for centuries, the one who at times had stood sentinel at her prison. Growing up, Azadiel had been their guardian, their teacher, and ultimately… their betrayer.

She found him standing behind the chair Cassius occupied, his troubled gaze flicking back and forth between Leira's limp body within her grasp, and the lifeless body of Dravite held within the herald's embrace.

A final voice joined in this one thick with despair.

"Do it, Mara. Kill her… end them both."

Cassius. His normally golden skin had taken on a sickly pallor, his posture stiff even though his shoulders were slumped over in defeat, and again those coal dark eyes stared out at her with that haunted expression that cut through to her soul. He spared not even a glance at the woman who begged him for her life, a being who was his lover, and the mother of his unborn child.

"I am not strong enough Mara, but you are."

There is nothing our Sarratum would not do for you, Sarrum sa

"Cassius, don't dare ask this of her, you know she won't deny you. This will be on her conscience." Azadiel's head whipped back to Mara. "Amara, do not do this." His voice was without anger, but their former teacher's tone retained that undercurrent of disappointment which even after five centuries made her want to flinch and obey.

Her attention returned to the bleeding Erinyes in her grasp at the sound of her choked gasps for air. And that darkness living inside of her stirred, spurring on her magick, eager for the kill.

Leira's death would be justice, it would offer vengeance for what she had stolen. But killing the growing life she carried in her womb would only bring sorrow. For it was as Azadiel said, his child. And there was nothing of her demon she would ever harm.

Her fingers shook, confidence waning with each second that passed, her hatred for the demoness conflicting with her loyalty for the sin-eater.

Her Cassius had wanted children, a family, it had been part of their dream. A future which the fates had cruelly denied them.

It would never happen for her, but the sin-eater could still have that happiness if he wished it. As long as he remained free from the corruption of the Nessus and didn't fall prey to its madness, the demon would be a loving and devoted father. Of this, she had no doubt.

"This is a 'speak now or forever hold your peace' type of moment, demon. Are you very sure this is what you wish done?" Her voice grew unsteady, her grip nearly faltering, but if he wished it—she would end it. Her magick lashed out in agitation at her continued resistance.

"I can only ever acknowledge as my own the children who possess my smile… and your eyes."

Her grip broke, and the breath she held left in a rush when realizing the significance behind his words. *He remembered.*

"Sin… those words belong to another life. If you want me to be strong for you, then speak of it no more."

Leira was unceremoniously dropped onto the ground, crumpling into a heap before Levistus gathered her. With great care the advisor cradled her form, pressing a piece of cloth against the laceration to stifle the bleed, his expression outraged.

"She carries the King's child Mara, his only heir, you have no right to it."

His child. Once upon another life she vowed to give him a son, one he would love. Once upon a different time, he had vowed to give her a daughter, one she would dote on. It should've been her to carry their child in her belly, their son or daughter he cradled in his arms.

Another life, a different girl, a different demon.

"You're wrong Levistus, I have *every* right imaginable."

No one in the realms could claim more right than her, nor was anyone more bound to silence than she. And in that silence, she was left to wonder how many more times those pieces of her broken heart could shatter before there simply was nothing left of it.

"Amara—"

Whatever Azadiel had been about to say was interrupted as the ground beneath their feet began to tremble, slightly at first, then quickly picking up intensity, as the atmosphere within the Nessus shifted and grew oppressive. All eyes shifted to Cassius as infernal energy flooded the room and a dark vortex of power began to take shape around him.

The Infernal energy was crushing, but it was the gravitational field building from him that held the bigger threat, that black hole could swallow them all if left unchecked.

“Sin, rein in your power...”

Rather than diminish, the vortex began to expand, siphoning all the energy within the room as if it were his to claim. Just as it had within the corridors of the ninth temple, the energy grew too stifling and her legs buckled. There was no fighting it as the vortex drained her power as if she had been pressed against a ley-line.

Her knees hit the unforgiving stone in time with Azadiel and Levistus, Jez’Piel only giving a small grunt before collapsing over Dravite’s body upon the bed.

“Demon, you kill me and I swear I’m going full poltergeist on your ass,” the words were hissed from between clenched teeth, her muscles seizing as painfully as the chasm continued to grow.

“CASSIUS STOP THIS!” Levistus’ voice broke with the struggle it took to breathe, his palms braced upon the basalt stone to hold himself up from being crushed down against Leira.

The quaking intensified as stone and furnishing was pulled into the dark chasm; the rumble was deafening but beneath it they could still make out the rising shrieks emanated by the denizens of the Hells. The Nessus was growing unstable as its Infernal power collided with the tremendous influx of energy, clashing with the divine power of its King.

“Dammit demon, calm yourself.” She lacked the energy for more than whispers, focusing instead on the struggle she was close to losing, her shaking arms would not support her much longer. After four hundred years, she refused to die like a squashed bug. “CASS!”

“Mara…”

Relief flared through her when she caught the spark of recognition flash through those cold dark eyes. But it was too late, her arms gave out and her head struck rock, her cheek scraping against rough stone. Between the pressure of infernal energy and the pull of the dark chasm, it felt as if she were being torn apart.

A booted foot came into her line of sight, arms moved around her like steel bands. Then she was lifted off the ground, picked up effortlessly as if she were the equivalent of young Cora’s precious doll. With her secured in his hold, she felt him sink back into the chair, pulling her deeper into his

lap as he pressed his head against the curve of her neck. Clinging to her as if she were an anchor.

“What’s happening to me Mara?”

Her hand moved to splay against his cheek, the other buried within the thick mass of his hair, her fingers running through the familiar softness. The intimacy of the caress a balm to her own soul even if intended it to ease him.

“Your power has expanded so much in such a short time, and in your distress, you’re losing grip over it. Calm yourself sin-eater, and control it.”

He held her, and she embraced him; the intimacy shared grossly out of place under the current circumstances, yet neither of them able to break away. After long moments the punishing pressure within the Nessus began to ease, the stone surrounding them ceasing its violent trembles as the chasm began to close, before dissipating fully.

More time passed, the Nessus eerily silent except for the soft grunts of Azadiel and Levistus and Leira’s heavy sobs. And it was the sound of those sobs which had reality shattering the illusion of comfort and belonging she’d found in his arms. Leira carried his heir, which made her the sin-eater’s consort.

Her legs protested the effort it took for her to rise off his lap, his arm around her waist halting her when she trying to leave his side.

“Sin, you need to let go now...”

Rather than allow her distance, his hold tightened, pulling her to him until she stood directly before him. “I don’t think I can.”

Her eyes fell shut when the heat of his palm moved to splay across her stomach. His voice no more than a broken whisper as he pressed his lips against the flat of her belly. “I didn’t skip any of my dosages, I swear it.”

“I know Cass, but even I can’t stop the will of the gods when they choose to intervene. Ostara sought to bless you with a child… so she did.”

“OUR CHILD!”

At the shrill sound of that feminine screech, all eyes in the room fell upon Leira, her eyes watery from shed tears and still bloodshot from Mara’s unforgiving grip. She kept her leathery wings wrapped around her like a cocoon, and her pursed lips quivering with every shaky breath she took.

And even Amara was forced to admit herself taken by Leira’s visage of innocence and frail beauty. It caused an instinctual urge to claim and

protect her, and in the sin-eater's case, to corrupt that innocence. It was little wonder he'd found her irresistible.

"You chose me. I'm the one you took to your bed after she rejected you! I was the one who took your seed after she ran away."

Mara hissed out a breath when the fingers which moments earlier had lay splayed against her side and abdomen clenched tight, noting how the demon's brows had furrowed.

"You ran from me, but you didn't choose the Fae… did you?"

His cheek brushed against her abdomen, the caress of silk and the heat of his skin nearly destroying the little sanity she had left to cling to.

"Demon, this is hardly the time..."

The shrill noise distorted and it took a moment to realize it sound was that Leira's laughter. "The King of the Hells spilling his seed inside warlock filth. They are our inferiors and are meant to serve us. You should be grateful you were spared the shame."

If she grew to regret it later she would find a way to deal with it—the demoness was as good as dead. With her magick exhausted from the drain, Amara pulled free her athame then lunged. And was instantly hauled back.

"I swear to mother Kali, I'll fucking hurt you if you don't release me this very instant sin-eater!"

"Did you take your place on the altar Mara? Did Ostara bless you also?"

"What? No! Demon, we can talk *after* I collect her head."

A fearful yelp interrupted their standoff, both of them looking back to discover Levistus sprawled out upon the ground, hurled clear across the library to crash land into a bookcase. Surprise turned to shock at the sight of Jez'Piel standing over Leira's cowering form, long fingers clasped around Leira's throat. With his face distorted with rage, the celestial appeared a stranger.

"LIAR! She was strong and loyal, it was Dravite who made my fall from grace acceptable because it meant perhaps she could be mine. She was above you in all virtues, and you took her from me!"

His grip tightened, the sound of snapping bone reverberating through the room like a cannon blast. Leira's head lolled to the side, neck broken. Within a moment Levistus was by her side, checking the unconscious Erinyes.

“Dark Hells Jez’Piel, you barely missed severing her spine, you could’ve killed her!”

With a quick squeeze against his hand, she urged for Cassius to release her, and he complied, but not before running his thumb along the inside of her palm, across his sigil. Then she knelt beside Jez and the demoness’ still form.

“Angel, that’s enough. By killing her in rage you give the corruption of the Nessus a way into your mind. She isn’t worth the price you’ll be made to pay.” She spoke softly, trying to soothe his temper while placing her fingers against Leira’s temples, probing the barriers of her mind.

“There is something distorted about her imprint. How long has she been in the Nessus?”

“Basileus brought her to me soon after the warlocks were established into the harem.” The sin-eater’s voice was heavy with sorrow, for again the actions of Prince of Pleasures had cost him dearly.

Without giving further explanation she pressed against the feeble barriers protecting Leira’s mind, and was unsurprised by what she found, for she had seen it countless times before—madness. The demoness was consumed by corruption.

As she sifted through memories and emotions imprinted within Leira, she followed the trail of destruction left behind by the female’s own cruelty, selfishness, and greed. The Erinyes had said she loved, but Amara could find no trace of it, only an obsessive desire of the sin-eater, and her greed for a crown. Corruption hadn’t only taken root, it had consumed her entirely.

Asmodeus had been the very first to fall to the corruption, since then many had followed him into madness.

She was about to withdraw from the Erinyes’ mind when another energy imprint brushed along her essence. One that impossibly pure compared to the vileness she had found within the demoness. Her curiosity piqued, Amara followed its trail, leading her to find its origin within that fragile life that grew within Leira’s womb. And she was the one pulled in as a vibrant image burned itself into her mind’s eye.

A young girl, who she guessed not much older than six was standing with her back towards her. Dark caramel hair spilled down her small frame, its coloring streaked with strands of pure gold. And when the girl glanced over her shoulder, Amara smiled, for the grin which curled the

girl’s lips was very familiar indeed. It was her demon’s smile, and this was his daughter.

Odile

Just as suddenly as she had appeared, the girl was gone.

“Mara, are you alright?”

“Huh?” The sudden plunge back into the physical realm was jarring, and it took her a moment to become aware of the fact she had been pulled away from the demoness, causing the connection to break. The demon’s arms were around her.

“Mara answer me…”

“Did you sense her, Cass?”

Odile

She had just met with his daughter, and she was beyond imaginings. The demon would grow to love her, and she would bring him happiness, of this Amara had no doubts.

“Sense who?”

“Leira will live until the child is born, I can’t…”

“Finally, someone is making sense here,” Levistus grumbled.

“Stay out of this Levistus.” Strong fingers gently brushed along her cheek, the sweet caress a stark contrast to his harsh words. “No, we end this. Either you claim your vengeance, or I shall kill her myself. I won’t be forced to accept her for consort, that position is filled.”

She pressed the palm one hand against his cheek, pulling him eye to eye with her. “I won’t harm your child.” She poked the index finger of her free hand into his chest, right above his heart. “And neither will you!”

“It’s not my child.”

She had to be strong, she could do this... for *him.*

“Nonsense. You may not be able to understand my reasons for this now demon, but you will one day. When the child is born, Leira is to be handed over to me, Er-Agate deserves vengeance for her sister’s death. Until then, protect your child, Sin.”

With a quick step back, she moved out of his arms, summoning whatever infernal energy she could gather to power her magick and open a portal. She needed to leave before making a complete spectacle of herself.

“Go and look after your business sin-eater, I have funeral arrangements to see to. Since the dead can’t cross through, the ceremony will need to be

held within the Nessus. Expect my acolytes here within the hour to see to the preparations. And keep *her* away from them...”

“Amara.” His voice followed her into the portal. “Promises were made…”

She turned her back to him while stepping into the portal, cowardice perhaps, but his words were undoing the last bit of composure she’d been clinging to. And she would not let him see her fall apart.

“And promises were broken.”

She barely finished the crossing before her scream tore free from somewhere deep inside her. Disillusionment and heartbreak assailing her as they tore open ancient wound. The intensity of loss which assailed her so potent, that it ripped right through her into the Realm of Asurim, causing the earth of the Nine Dominions to quake under the power of her grief.

Mourning those stolen dreams, broken promises, and the bitter loss of a friend.

77

LOVE IS DESTRUCTION

"I CAN'T PROMISE TO MAKE YOU HAPPY. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT IS." His hands circled her waist. Touching her. After a century of iron bars separating them, he was actually touching her. She was so… warm.

"But I'll cherish you, assat-shi." He kissed her jaw again, right where it met up with her ear. He wanted to nuzzle right into her softness and scent. "For all of the rest of our days. We'll be each other's light." He kissed down her jaw, lips hovering over hers. "Each other's strength."

"We already are," she said, sighing into his mouth. "Just hold me. I've been wondering what that would feel like for the last hundred years, to have your arms around me."

A slight shudder ran through her body, and his hands slid to her back, then up to her shoulders as he held her close. Burning the feel of her into his memory.

"I'll make you a ring. So the world can see that you're mine." He rested his hand over her heart. "Then I'll brand you with my sigil over this breast so every time I see it, it reminds me you are my world. Everything I am exists in there." He pressed his finger against her beating heart.

"And you'll wear my mark over your heart as well. So that even when you're not with me, I'll be a part of you. And you'll forever be my Cassius." She pressed against his chest, her arms wrapped tight.

They needed to leave. Basileus was forever coming to his room in the night, they had only this brief window.

He just needed…

Their lips met.

It had felt like an eternity, waiting for this moment. To learn her taste, her touch, everything about it felt… right. As soon as he closed his arms around her, his world shifted into place, the meaning of his existence finally made clear. There was no description for how powerful the feeling of rightness was that filled his chest. Her lips… so soft and hot against his.

They were running out of time. Had to get to the portal.

Just a little more… their tongues met, and his insides turned molten.

The memory faded, he tried to hold on to it with everything he had… his mind fading into another. This memory not trapped behind fog.

Once cleaned from the blood, wounds, and grime that had concealed her, he discovered the warlock was beautiful, albeit in an untamed, untouchable sort of way. Injustice burned through him. That his father thought it reasonable to keep such a creature contained... perhaps he'd tried to tame her and failed? She hadn't told him her reasons for imprisonment, and he wouldn't ask.

"Sin-eater, once we bind ourselves there will be no going back," she said, defiance shining bright in her eyes.

Daring him.

"I promise…" His words were cut off when her hand slapped over his mouth.

"Don't ever say those words to me," she spat out. Her hand trembled, and for a moment, she looked devastated. Crushed. "I want no promises from you, Prince of Lust."

Her anger was delectable. Untamed feral creature that she was just needed the right person to tame that… he could just take her… no. He didn't want her to turn into one of his mindless concubines.

A creature so powerful should never be leashed. He could feel her power, coiled deep inside, waiting to strike.

He nodded. "I'll release you, and you'll feed my power. Until I'm strong enough to bring him down." His anger was always close to the surface. One day, he feared, he was going to turn out just like his sire. Perhaps she would be powerful enough to kill him before it ever got to that?

"Let's do this, demon." She held out her palm to him. "And don't make me regret it."

He picked up her hand in his and a dizzy wave of familiarity shot through his chest. Her touch was like ice, lacking any of the warmth he'd been expecting. Still, her hand felt like it belonged there.

He let his power leak out, repeating the warlock cast and the binding words they'd agreed upon. He felt his sigil burning into her skin, her forehead breaking out with a fine sheen of sweat.

He traced his fingers over the markings. "You're mine now."

Her eyes filled with sorrow. He saw it before they dropped to their joined hands. Did she have regrets?

He let go of her hand and started unbuttoning his shirt. Her breathing sped up, her hand closing, her other one cradling it, her eyes following his fingers.

"What…?" She brought her eyes up to his and stepped back from him. "We're not sealing the deal with sex." Her tongue darted out over her bottom lip, her lust and fear hitting him in equal increments.

No, they wouldn't. She was his one ally, her endgame the same as his own. She might not like their arrangement, but he did. And he wouldn't risk it for something as easy as lust.

He opened his shirt. "Mark me here." He pointed to the left side of his chest, right above his heart.

Her breath caught, her eyes closed. "Not there… give me your hand."

"It has to be there, so I can best keep it hidden from view," he said, nodding. He wouldn't have to constantly hold up a glamour to hide it, and… it just felt right. A grin tugged his lip, his priestess probably wouldn't like his second suggestion any better.

Her lips thinned before her palm moved to rest upon his chest, startling him by lightly caressing the spot first before pressing her power into him. It warmed him, like a flame feeding his soul—like nothing he'd ever felt.

Yes, this partnership was going to work out just fine…

"You want to seal this with a kiss?" He sounded breathless, his fingers lifting her head up to read the expression in her eyes. Pain… and desire.

Her body stiffened, her hand snatched back to her own chest, her eyes lingering on his. Her mark burned. He'd have to glamour it, sometimes—

He jolted awake, sitting up, his body aching for her, her sigil burning his chest.

He reached for Jez, needing something.

Couldn't have her. His chest ached, something inside of him stirring.

He'd had her once, and now he'd lost her for good.

He climbed out of bed and went straight for the whiskey. His father's stores of liquor might actually do him some good. Feeling numb was better than feeling dead. Like his soul wasn't whole.

He didn't dismiss the dreams, he turned them over in his mind, chest heavy with the knowledge that she'd been so familiar to him in one—then he just hadn't known her. First, he'd been her world, then her jailer. She'd been his treasure, then she'd been a stranger.

She had been his, he had no doubt of it left. Even if his memories remained shattered for the remainder of eternity, this he knew. He could feel it.

She was three years younger than me.

There was only one answer possible, some time in between those two lives, his memories had been stolen. Everything he had of her had been taken. But how?

He slammed back his glass of whiskey, willing himself to forget. He couldn't handle remembering. Not now. What was the point of remembering when he had nothing left to offer her?

He couldn't make things right. His encroaching flood of memories bedamned. They were only setting him up for torment.

He opened a gate, following his Herald's essence—and nearly turned right back around when her scent pervaded his senses. Jez was in her rooms? He closed the gate and turned to her bed, ready to snarl-

Jez lay there, wrapped around Agate, both lost to an exhausted slumber. All his anger drained out of him. Jez needed to take comfort where he could find it. He would never begrudge him that.

He wandered over to Amara's bar, opening a decanter and smelling it, moving on to the next. He settled on the brandy, poured a healthy amount in a tumbler and made his way to the sofa in front of her fireplace.

His steps faltered when he noticed she was already sitting there, her bare feet peeking out from under crimson robes, tucked up under her as she curled up in her seat. She was staring at the flames as if searching for something in their depths, or some*one*, her expression one of longing.

He should leave her to her peace.

But here he could finally breathe. Was it the same for her? Were the haunting memories the reason she had stuck around in the shadows,

silently watching over him all these years? It would've been hell for her, and still, he couldn't stop from selfishly hoping that was the case.

He sat down beside her, sipping his drink, and with a heavy exhale, relaxed into the sofa. His eyes turning again to the broken figures resting upon her bed, before tiredly closing them. "Is love just meant to destroy?"

His eyes snapped open when he felt her small hand slide underneath his own. "Perhaps it is. For us."

Cold. She had felt warm once… when he had held her in his arms. Without giving it thought he slid his fingers through hers, pressing their palms together in silent assurance.

His heart slammed against his ribcage when she leaned against his shoulder.

They just… needed each other. Perhaps just for tonight, perhaps for eternity.

78

NO MORE THAN ECHOES

THE SIGIL UPON HER PALM BEGAN TO WARM BETWEEN THEIR JOINED HANDS, both their gazes enthralled by the fire dancing inside the hearth.

"Levistus is going to lose his mind if he learns of you sneaking into my chambers again."

"He's busy soothing anxious factions within the demonarchy, some fear Dravite's death will lead to conflict between our realms."

The statement brought a wry smile to her lips. "Fear, or hope?"

He drew a deeply from the tumbler in his grasp, the sweet, cedar-like notes of the brandy mixing with his own enticing scent and clean hints of aftershave. She inhaled deeply, his presence a balm to frayed nerves. Just having him near helped ease the pressure in her chest and calmed the chaos which forever ruled her mind.

Despite being aware of the foolishness of it, her shoulder leaned into him, then slowly the rest of her body relaxed in his hold. She was tired, and numb. The brief respite he offered felt like a lifeline, the comfort, and safety of his arms simply too tempting to resist. "You feel so warm…"

"And you're freezing."

Discarding the empty tumbler, his arm came around her shoulder, enveloping her as if to banish away that persistent cold which had taken permanent residency within her.

The last centuries had felt as though she were buried alongside her demon, slowly suffocating, each breath a little smaller than the last. It was only now, as they sat together in the dark she was finally able to take her

first deep breath. But with that comfort came fear, its hold over her growing with every memory he regained. *Odile.* He had to live, had someone to live and fight for. Which meant that she shouldn't be in his arms, and he shouldn't be in her chambers, but she didn't have the strength to send him away. Instead, it was quite possible she would break if he were let go of her right now.

"May the gods protect you from my weakness, demon."

"Priestess. I'm beginning to suspect your gods forsook us long ago."

Her hand was lifted into his then turned over to expose his sigil upon her palm. His gaze abandoned the flames to study the lines of the marks upon her flesh, his brows furrowed together as if lost in deep thought.

"I don't understand any of it Mara, it feels as if my mind is no longer my own. There are voids and dark spaces in between, filled with fragments of memories I can't seem to place."

She knew he needed answers; he deserved them, yet she could give him none. "It's dangerous to chase after those fragments demon, especially now."

His brows knitted together for a moment, agitation flashing through his expression. "I remember receiving your mark, here, right above my heart. And I recall placing mine upon the inside of your palm."

Gentle fingers brushed aside the neckline of her robe, and she allowed it. Sighing softly as his warm touch moved over her chilled skin, his finger trailing the outline of his sigil against unmarked flesh directly above her heart.

"My marking was supposed to have been placed here instead because everything I am… I *was*... belonged there."

Her fingers closed over his, pressing his touch to her heart. "I carry your mark upon me proudly, no matter where it was placed."

He wouldn't know that she'd already been marked, that she carried the name of *her* Cassius carved upon her useless heart. The greedy demon had claimed it the very first time they had met and had carried it with him into oblivion. Leaving her behind, cold and broken.

"I'm haunted, Mara. Tormented nightly by iron bars I cannot breach and familiar eyes gazing at me from beyond them. I have visions of a girl who I feel is more precious to me than life itself, and no matter how much I try, I can't reach her."

"Perhaps you were never supposed to."

She sensed his hold around her tighten ever so slightly. “Sometimes I can hear her screams in my head, and dread such as I’ve never known before fills me. Then there is nothing but agony, mine and hers.”

She released his hand to reach for the inside pocket of silk her robes, pulling out a small vial she had been carrying with her ever since Levistus’s message.

“They are nothing more than echoes inside your head, Sin. A life that’s no longer lived, with beings who no longer exist. They’re ghosts, and they’ll destroy you if you chase them.”

With shaking fingers, she placed the vial into his palm, trying desperately to keep her tone calm, even as she readied to lose him to the sin-eater once more.

“I can offer you peace...” Her voice sounded small, even to her own ears. This had to be done, but it also had to be his choice. “By drinking this you’d banish the memories and bury your ghosts. Anything that might trigger the collapse of your mind will be filtered away and destroyed.”

She wasn’t sure what reaction to expect. Would he pull back from her in repulsion, or greedily lay claim to it? The vial lay still within his palm, seconds ticked by, and he didn’t move. When finally he did, it was only to pull her closer to him as he quietly contemplated the dark liquid shimmering eerily in the fire's light.

“What if I don’t want to forget?”

A chuff escaped her lips, its sound almost mocking. “Then you’ll die, demon. If you want a future, then you must let go of the past.”

“Do you want me to take it?”

She wanted to say yes, wanted his misery to reach its overdue end, but couldn’t bring herself to say it. Deep down she knew herself to be a dark creature, for even though the demon could never love her as her Cassius had, she selfishly wanted him to remember. Remember who he had been, and who she was.

Another life, another girl, another demon.

“My own wishes have nothing to do with this, the choice is yours alone to make. But this poison is the only way I know how to break you free from your past and protect your mind from breaking.”

Heat blossomed through her chest as his lips closed around the pulse at her throat, his hold firming when small shudders of pleasure ran down the length of her back. Her thoughts scattered, lost to sensation when his

mouth began a lazy path up to her ear, his words breathless whispers. The devious demon had learned her mind scrambled when he kissed her like this.

“I deserve to know the truth before I forget.” He closed his fingers around the vial, almost crushing its frail glass. His free hand moved to clasp around her nape, his touch gentle as he tilted her head to meet his gaze. “Tell me about *her*, my *wife*.”

That blissful mindlessness shattered, instead, loud alarm bells rang through her senses. “Then will you drink?”

She wouldn’t be able to tell him all, nothing about that fateful night, no mentions as to what became of the girl and her demon prince. But some questions she could perhaps answer, as long he forgot them after.

“I answer you best I can, and you take the poison, deal?”

The sting of teeth at the sensitive tip of her ear had her yelp in surprise. “Always with the deals Priestess, one would almost mistake you for a full-blooded demoness. You have my word, you answer my questions and I take your poison.”

It would all end tonight, no longer would she look in his eyes and find anything other than distrust and distance reflecting back at her from their dark depths. Once again she would simply be the priestess, his reluctant ally. Not his friend, not wife, nothing more than a shadow to call on in a time of need. He would move on to become a father, a husband, and a king. And she would keep him safe from Namtar for as long as she could.

Her head lowered, her eyes transfixed upon the vial held in his grip. None of it was fair, she suffered, he suffered. Again she would be left behind to remember, again he was made to forget and move ahead. She would die and he would live. He would settle for the twisted façade of the life they once dreamed of, share it with his maddened Erinyes consort.

None of this was his fault but didn’t seem to matter at this moment. Loss, disillusion, heartbreak, and defeat made for a toxic concoction of emotions running through her, poisoning her. He wanted to find out about his assat, yearned to know her, and he would.

For no matter how deeply she buried the past, his assat didn’t want to stay buried. She didn’t want to remain forgotten, didn’t want to grieve… the Priestess was broken, but Amara — she was angry.

A growl ripped through her chest, her claws extending then digging into the brocade fabric of the divan. Pain, sorrow, shock, love, loss,

sympathy, guilt — each broke free from the chains she had bound them with.

“You are such a fucking ass, Cassius! Did you even for one moment stop to think what you would be putting me through by asking this? Going on without you has been torment, but as long as I kept us buried deep enough, then perhaps it could make it through the days. You chase ghosts I’ve been trying to lay to rest, and you’ve disrupted them to the point they’ll no longer remain buried.

“You haunt my thoughts, my dreams. I have no peace and am forced to grieve the loss of you each time. You’re cruel, my demon. After tonight you’ll forget me, yet I’ll remain haunted for us both.” Her breath faltered, her heart stuttered in her chest, her teeth slicing into her flesh as she bit down, desperate to stop the words which spilled from her mouth.

His grip on her nape tightened, his thumb brushed along her bottom lip, wiping away beads of crimson with his caress. “Then why didn’t you forget? If you mourn me so, then didn’t you take the poison yourself. Why offer it to me instead?”

Her eyes locked with his unforgiving gaze, unable to read the expression held within their dark depths.

“Because then we would’ve never existed, and no one would hold accountable those who were responsible for our fate.”

Her fingers around his, coaxing his fist to open, guiding the vial to his lips. “Drink… bury us both in the ruins of your mind, where we belong.”

“To me, who were you Amara?”

Hope, or despair? How could two such very different emotions possibly be confused for each other, still she couldn’t distinguish which of the two was the cause for his eyes to have darkened to near black. In her eyes, what had he found, fear or relief? For both were present when she answered him.

“You’ve called me by many names through the years; Girl, Warlock, Priestess, Mara, wench, amata…”

His breath was on her lips, those dark eyes keeping her prisoner. “Amata-shi, my beloved.”

“Assat.”

His hold on her was almost painful, his fingers trembling against her body, his mouth brushing against hers. “Assat-shi, my wife…”

He sounded breathless, and could almost hear the forceful drum of his heart pounding against his chest. “To you Amara, who was I?”

Her palms cupped his cheeks, her thumb brushing along the hard angles of his jaw, her lips brushing his in her whispers. “Vir meus, you were my husband... e’ libbu shi.”

“I was your heart...”

She caught the flicker of obstinacy within his gaze too late, instantly releasing him to lunge for the vial so precariously held between two fingers.

“Don’t, Cass—you vowed!”

79

A PROMISE IS A PROMISE

His fingers hooked through hers, pulling her hand back as the vial slipped through his grasp. Her gasp in time with the barely audible “clink” of glass as the vial shattered apart against the floor.

“NO!” No, no, no… With a forceful yank, Amara broke free from his loosened grip and dropped onto the cold floor, desperate to try and save whatever she could of the potion. “It required the heart-string of a celestial — I can’t duplicate it!”

Even as she scooped the liquid to her, she could feel it rapidly dissipate beneath her touch, her fingers scraping against shards of glass as the greedy stone soaked up the valuable contents.

“Dark gods…” She was going to be sick, what had she done? What had he done? “We had a deal, demon. You lied!”

The soft rustle of fabric had her glaring up at him as he slid down the sofa to her side. “I didn’t lie to you, Mara. The agreement was that you would answer me, and I would take the potion. And I did take it from you when you handed it to me. The deal was completed, I never agreed to drink.”

“No… that’s not…” Her jaw slackened, her brows raised in disbelief and she shook her head slowly, undone by her own carelessness. Literal. Demons were stuck to the letter of the bargain struck. “Oh hells...”

Misery swamped her. One brief moment of recklessness and she had condemned them both. And he was... laughing.

“I was wondering how long it would take for you to catch on. You’re usually not this easy to bait.” His grin was more than a little self-satisfied.

“You tricked me.”

His warm hands closed over hers, pulling her fingers away from the glass shards. “No, I made use of a situation to my benefit, same as you would’ve done. Stop this, there’s nothing left of the stuff and your fingers are bleeding.”

Looking down, she had to concede he was right, there wasn’t enough of the draft left to salvage it. And even if she did manage to get her hands on another celestial heart it would be useless, the draft had taken fifteen years to distill. Originally it had been meant for her, to take once vengeance had been secured. The final stage of freedom—to forget the horrors, to forget *him*, and to force an end to her grieving.

She stared at him as he plucked the small shards from her skin one by one, with the utmost care, cleaning away the drops of potion and blood sticking to them with his own shirt.

“Sin, that was a really stupid thing to do, the potion was our last defense against your memories. You really don’t understand what is at risk here… I don’t think I can protect you anymore.”

He moved only when satisfied every bit of glass had been removed from her fingers, his fingers brushing aside her hair to meet her stormy gaze. The smile that curled his lips one which always caused those funny flutters to stir in her belly.

“I understand enough, and if my memories destroy me, then so be it. I want to remember.”

Damn him, she wanted to be angry with him, not act like a besotted fool. She needed to focus. “You truly are a selfish bastard, Sin. Who will rule the Hells with you gone? And what would become of my realm without the support of the Nessus?” Her throat was closing up, her chest too constricted to breathe. “How can you expect me to keep going if I lose you?” The last uttered in accusation, spurred on by centuries of grief.

“You’re selfish too, Mara. You had no right to keep me out, to keep yourself a secret while I stumbled along. I’ve searched for you in every dream and vision, followed your trail as far as it would lead, only to be lost when you slipped beyond my grasp.” His jaw was set with the same determination reflected in that fire-lit gaze. “I won’t relent until I recall

every single memory of who I am, who we were... and what was done to break us apart."

Realistically there were only two ways their story could possibly end. Either the sin-eater pushed too hard — he would remember, and he would die. Or one of their vast collection of enemies would succeed in ending their lives before that happened. Namtar was waiting, and their story would soon reach its final act.

She could no longer protect him, the potion was gone. He was stubborn and would remember. His soul was destroyed, could not be restored. But she had planned for the worst-case scenario, which now seemed the most probable. As his mind deteriorated, a new imprint could be placed within to anchor him. A reset, a new sin-eater.

Some of the ancient gods were still powerful enough to imprint, and he would possess something they all wanted, salvation from the fade. By dying and gifting the crystal to Cassius, Namtar would've lost his rights of contract. Mephistopheles and Azadiel could secure a trade, the sin-eater's life for her soul. The sin-eater had some allies who would see him through, his Herald would act as his compass, and Odile would become his horizon.

Cold fingers slipped around her neck, pushing aside the unruly locks of hair to unclasp the dainty chain around her neck, then lifting it up to reveal the crystal it supported. As she let go, the warm stone slid down the silk covering her chest, where the demon caught it within in his palm.

Infernal curiosity reflected in his gaze when he brought the crystal up to his line of sight, studying it. When one has lived for centuries, oddities became treasures.

"It's almost black yet radiates from within. I don't recognize it, but the light—it feels as if I've seen its equal before."

Amara gave a noncommittal shrug as she grasped the crystal from his palm and wrapped her arms around his neck. "It's not a precious stone, what you sense is an imprint of my own magick infused within the crystal." Again, technically not a lie.

The lock clasped around his neck.

"You're giving it to me?"

An odd sense of relief washed through her the moment the ominous crystal settled against his chest. As long as it was in his possession, he'd have a bargaining tool. A chance, that was all she had left to give.

The price already paid.

“It’s yours demon, consider it an old promise kept. Of me being with you, always. Even when apart...”

His fingers closed around the crystal with care, holding it in place, yet his dark eyes were locked on hers with an expression of pure agitation. “I’ll accept your token, but not your answer. How can you even dispute that you belong at my side?”

Another life, a different girl, a different demon...

He wasn’t *her* Cassius, she wasn’t his Amata. But right now, in this very moment — she simply couldn’t bring herself to care. He would live. That thought eased some of the shock of losing the poison. He had made his move on the board, and so had she, what happened next would not influence the end of the game.

“Let us not argue about this demon, it’s pointless.”

His arms closed around her waist and he pulled her against his chest, cutting off her words as his lips began to trail down her neck. He was playing dirty, fully aware his kisses caused her thoughts to falter.

His eyes were hooded when he gazed up at her, but still, she could see the amber flames of the fire reflecting in his eyes. Its effect so similar, she could almost imagine it was her demon staring at her from those dark depths. That it was her husband holding her. Loving her…

“Cassius?”

A soft groan of approval was his reply as he breathed against her mouth, his breath becoming her own. “I like hearing my name upon your lips, makes me wonder how it will taste.”

She didn’t fight it, nor did she run to hide in the shadows this time. She’d done what was needed, so who could blame her for stealing this small moment. With that thought, she closed that final distance between them, pressed her lips against his mouth, and kissed the demon.

His response was immediate as if having been waiting for her invitation. A groan rumbled through him as his tongue invaded, demanding entrance, all gentleness fading in favor of fervor.

Capturing the tip of his tongue between her teeth she suckled, pleasure washing through her at the sound of his sharp intake of breath. Her teasing short-lived when he reclaimed control of the kiss, even as she continued to challenge him for dominance. Her fingers splayed through the thick length of his hair, urging him closer as his kiss consumed her. Each of them

placing a claim on the other with tongue and touch, each caress growing greedier, more urgent.

Already she could feel his power surge through her, siphoning her lust even as he skillfully fueled it. He could drain her, kill her, but she knew he wouldn't. Right now, she could almost imagine herself… treasured.

His arm moved around her waist, running along the kamarband chains she refused to remove since that day at the market. Superstitious perhaps, but one couldn't serve the gods and not be wary of words spoken from beyond the veil.

A well-practiced twist had her suddenly pinned between the edge of the divan and his firm body, his hands sliding down the swell of her hips, squeezing before coming together to cup the swell of her ass. He lifted from the hard floor and spread beneath him upon the soft pillows from one breath to the next.

"Demon..."

"Not a damned word Mara, it's too late for those." His voice was a rasp.

The weight of him against her felt natural, their bodies aligning perfectly. She could feel him—all of him—pressing against her. His heat fused into her, and where he was firm, her body grew pliant.

That stubborn lock of hair which she loved to curl around her finger fell free across his forehead. Her lips turned up in a grin at the sight of his meticulously combed hair disheveled from her touch. Then she caught his gaze and amusement faded, her breath faltering. More than four centuries had passed since he had looked at her similarly. Molten heat and possession — intense.

His eyes moved to her mouth, as if to reconcile the shape of her lips with those haunting his memories.

"No iron bars this time…"

His mouth claimed hers, not relenting until her head swam with his scent, his touch, his taste. Each one she savored, burning them into her senses, engraving them into memory. Once their game had reached its end, she would live in these memories, and from them forge her own heaven.

He licked and sucked at her lips, as though tasting her in every way possible. She drank down every kiss for the exquisite poison they were. His hands roamed, caressing, squeezing, his touch growing as frantic as she was feeling.

She had made a miscalculation, had always believed she was the poison mistress, his enabler. It was blatantly clear he was her drug, and she his addict, yearning for him.

“I want you… need you.” Her confession hung between them, his body going still.

For a dreadful moment, she thought he might refuse her, that notion forgotten when those strong hands tightened around her waist. Her world spun, and she was pressed atop him, his fingers spreading her thighs, guiding her legs to straddle his lap. Teeth sank into the swell of her bottom lip, honey and whiskey voice gone deep with need.

“Then take me, Amata… and remind me I’m yours.”

The kiss changed again, frantic to an all-consuming — desire, despair, pain and pleasure, each emotion carried its own flavor, and she claimed the taste of each from his lips. Claiming everything the other had to offer, demanding more.

The kiss broke with both gasping for air, lungs burning, yet he stole her breath all over again as he slid his fingers between the opening of her robes, his touch dancing along bared skin.

“I remember telling you what I would do once I finally had you in my arms...”

“*Am I going to like it?”*

“No ghost or delusion. You’re real, tell me you’re real.” His hands were shaking as he clung to her, so were hers.

“I’m real… uhn...” Her lips parted on a soft cry when his touch slid up between her legs, cupping her sex. Her insides were clenching. *Aching* for him.

He thrust a finger inside her, and she nearly came undone. Her head falling back on a gasp as heat bloomed through her belly and pooled wetly between her thighs, her sex soaking the fabric of his slacks.

Words. He might not want them… but they were needed. That last bit of sanity she possessed was pleading with her.

“Demon, that was a different life. The promises made between us, I hold you to none if them… ahh.” She groaned when his thumb circled the swollen nub of her clit. Her muscles coiling with each jolt of pleasure he sent through her.

He slowly withdrew his finger from her, her body instantly mourning its loss. “Release me of my promises if you will, but I’m not that generous

and will hold you to every single one you've made. I will make sure to remember every… single… one."

When his fingers again probed at her opening, she was mindless with need. Her hips rocked, guiding him into her sheath as she wantonly rode his hand. Each stroke inching her higher, bringing her closer to that abyss.

"Demon, please..."

"Your demon."

His fingers curled ever so slightly, finding that hidden spot with a master's touch, leaving her aching with need as her sex spasmed around his finger. So damned close. At that very last second he pulled back, leaving her standing at the edge, to either fall or fly.

"Move, dammit just… move… please."

He didn't, his grip on her hip holding her perfectly still as she burned and ached, and he fed. "Your lust tastes like salvation..." His voice was dark with promise. "How many licks can I claim before you spill against my tongue?"

She tried to roll her hips at his words, to feel. He was toying with her even as she pulsed around him, her desire for release battling her instinctual need for leverage. If she burned, then so would he. The thought of seeing him fall apart beneath her mouth tipping the scale of indecision.

"Funny coincidence, I was just wondering the same thing about you…"

Small claws tore through the buttons of his shirt, scraping ever so lightly across his skin as the tips of her fingers trailed up his torso. His eyes grew black, his spine arching as his head fell back. Power.

In all things remain my equal sin-eater. Vow to match your loyalty to mine, and never seek to place me beneath your rule.

Beside the crystal resting upon his chest, her sigil emerged from its glamoured concealment. That singular, painful squeeze in her chest returning at the sight of it. An impulse had her lower her lips to him, pressing a kiss in the center of the marking. His free hand clasped her hip tightly, his hooded eyes falling shut even as he slowly withdrew his touch.

"Assat…" He groaned and bit his lip, the erotic sight of him forever burned into her mind's eye.

"Shhh..."

His fingers joined her struggle in opening his the fastening of his pants, her fingers easing the leather down long legs before closing around the base of his shaft. As soon as she touched him, he bucked. His body

going tense the moment she let her tongue dart over the silken flesh of his swollen crown, groaning at the salty taste of precum beading against her tongue. Then her mouth closed around him.

“OH… FUCK!” His fingers gripped her hair, his leg kicked out, knocking the abandoned whiskey tumbler off the small table, knocking it to the ground where the heavy crystal shattered apart upon the onyx stones.

“Cass…?”

At the sound of the angel’s voice, the demon bucked, and she nearly choked. She nearly withdrew from him but his grip kept her in place, and out of sight.

“Jez, either go back to sleep—or get the fuck out of here.”

His Herald either sensed the demon’s emotional state or had picked up on the heavy imprint of lust permeating through the room, he was up instantly.

“And what do I tell Levistus should he inquire about your absence?” Jez’s voice had a raw edge of amusement to it even as he collected the sleeping form upon the bed.

“That he isn’t invited. He’s to stay clear from Mara’s rooms if he values his position... ugh, hells…” His reply ended in a groan as her tongue slid down his length, her mouth closing around one of the sensitive orbs.

The creaking of heavy wooden doors proceeded the angel’s departure. Then a voice, female and soft, broke through the silence. “Where are we going?”

“*Going?”* Her attendant was not leaving Asurim, Agate was to stay within her protection, she wouldn’t risk losing her also.

“Herald, stop!” Forgetting modesty she shot up from her hiding spot behind the settee. Her cheeks flushing under the angel’s gaze. Still, her chin tilted in challenge. “Agate stays.”

With effort her attendant managed to squirm free from the herald’s possessive hold. “Sarratum-sa. Please let me go to her. I wish to oversee the right preparations are made for her pyre”

Before Amara could reply the demon came to a stand at her side, shamelessly buttoning his slacks, reminding her she’d forgotten to close her own robes. Her cheeks growing hot as she fumbled with the silk folds while avoiding her attendant's shocked gaze. His solid chest pressed

against her back, strong arms circled her waist, securing her robes while wrapping himself around her, using his height to shield her from sight.

“Er-Agate, I’ll see to it myself that your sister receives all the proper respects as she descends back into the darkness. On this you have my word.”

As he spoke his vow to her attendant, she leaned into him, pride and gratitude filling her. The demon not too prideful to comfort Agate, and knowing the importance of final rites, he would see Dravite well prepared for her final journey.

His lips tentatively brushed the top of her head as she eased into him as if to try out the caress for comfort. His chin came to rest atop her head even as she turned towards the window to see the first rays of light spill through its stained glass. Dawn was breaking upon the horizon, announcing an end to the little time they had stolen away together.

80

WHERE YOU BELONG

"LET'S GO HOME…"

Her head snapped back from the window to find Cassius staring at the light as well.

"Home? I am home."

He whirled on her, coming so close that their noses touched as he stared her down. "No, I mean where you belong Mara. We're going to the Nessus, to our bed, where I plan to keep you until you're too exhausted and sated to even think of leaving it again."

She pushed back at him. "I know you've had a lot to process in the last few hours demon, but have you completely lost your senses?"

"I'm starving, worked up, and I need *you*."

"I can't..." Already she could feel the crystal's compulsion work its will. The demon didn't realize the power she'd surrendered to him. If he insisted she come with him, then she would have no choice but to obey.

"What do you want from me? What will it take to make you understand that you are mine?" His expression fell, his eyes bright with confusion.

"But that's just it demon, I am not yours."

Dark gods but he looked crushed at her rejection, and truth was that a small part of her didn't care about any of the obstacles in their way, and simply wanted to follow him. Yet doing so would have severe consequences.

“*You* need to understand, demon. Leira carries your child, which means she now carries the highest rank in the Hells directly beneath yours. By demonarchy law, she *is* your consort until the babe is born. If I enter your bed, my place will be in your harem, and in her service. You’d reduce me to one of your concubines? You can’t expect me to submit to that.”

A soft hand moved over her shoulder, firm of grip and solid in support. Agate had silently joined her side, yet once there her attendant held silent no more.

“Sarrum-sa, I beg you—do not press your will on this. Neither warlocks nor gargoyles will stand for our Sarratum debasing herself and bending the knee to my sister’s murderer.”

Amara hissed at the words, Agate’s choice of title verging on treasonous.

“Is that what I am Agate, your Sarrum—am I your king?”

Dark coal eyes locked with hers and kept Amara bound in place as he questioned her attendant.

“My Sarrum would never see his Sarratum degraded. You take her to the Nessus and you’ll be shaming her before the entire demonarchy. The people of Asurim will revolt and leave our Dominae with little choice but rebel and come retrieve her... a war will ensue.” Agate’s voice was raw with unshed tears but firm in resolve. “You already have a consort in Hell, highness.”

“Leira is NOT my consort, you are, you admitted it,” he snarled out to Amara.

“A different life demon, vows made by different beings…” Her voice matching his in both anger and hurt.

“Take care of the words you speak Cassius if that’s overheard by the wrong ears...” It was Jez who spoke, coming up to his side.

“I DON’T CARE! I’ll be taking back everything I lost, everything that is mine, starting with MY WIFE. You claim we were different beings? Then we marry tonight and re-seal our vows.”

“Cass, you need to think this through.” The celestial ran his fingers through disheveled hair, thin lines of tension creasing the corners of his eyes. “Levistus might be an ass, but he’s right to worry. Most of the Archdeacons are terrified of the prophecy which follows you two, your own father was even afraid of it. You take Amara as your bride now, and

they'll all flock to Glasya's side to overthrow you. You can't afford to lose their allegiance now that Glasya is in the Nessus."

This time it was Mara's turn to suck in a hard breath. "She still resides within your domain. Within proximity of your heir? Sin..."

His temper flared through the room, the air turning heavy and oppressive. "I can't banish my sister without breaking contract, and it matters not. The child the Erinyes carries will never be my heir."

Beside her, she could sense Agate's magick rise as she began to summon forth a protection circle. It was instinct and duty which spurred her on, her attendant meaning only to protect her, still, Amara quickly waved off her efforts before the infuriated demon decided to take offense at the gesture. He would never harm them, and she would not fear him.

"I understand the concern, but it's easily corrected. Leira and her whelp die tonight by my own hands, then immediately following Dravite's ceremony, we marry." He nodded, his resolve firm.

She placed her palms against his chest and pushed enough of her magick through them to toss Cass off balance, making him lose his footing before she used the ball if her heel to stomp on his toes, knowing it wouldn't harm him, but still succeed in getting the stubborn demon's attention.

"You'll do no such thing. As much as I enjoy the thought of the demoness meeting her end, she carries your precious daughter in her womb. And you will NOT harm her."

All three visibly stiffened at her words, Cass's head jerking back as though he'd been struck. "A daughter? You know this for certain?"

"Yes, and she's everything beautiful, pure and innocent. She has a curious and strong spirit, and I'll protect her *even from you* should it be necessary. She's your future."

Her gaze never wandered from his while she moved back to the divan before the fireplace, the icy chill had returned, and Amara watched intently as myriad emotions crossed the demon's expression before eventually settling on wonderment.

"I'm going to have a daughter..."

He moved back to her, slumping down on the floor beside her, burying his head into her lap as Mara's fingers stroked through the soft strands of his hair.

“Yes.” Her chest seized. “You are being blessed with a curious and gentle child, one who’ll have your smile. She miraculously remains uncorrupted by the Nessus and her mother’s madness. You’ll grow to love her, and I know she’s going to adore you.”

Despite the softness which entered his eyes, his jaw clenched, his fists balled at his sides. He moved up onto the divan, crowding her, closing her into his warm embrace and all she wanted to do was crawl into his arms and never again let go.

“My heirs will be carried *by you*.”

“Our story ended long ago demon…”

Without warning, he pressed his mouth to hers, demanding her surrender while growling menacingly at her defiance. His fingers dug into her scalp when she didn’t open to him, leaving him to whisper against her lips.

“I exist Mara, and so do you. I’m not certain of much anymore, but I do know our story has not yet reached its ending… and I’ll prove it to you.”

As abruptly as it had started, he broke the kiss. Her body instantly missed his heat when he moved off the divan to open a hell-gate in the middle of her chambers.

“I’ll await your arrival upon Gaia’s next full moon.”

She watched Agate’s eyes grow large in horror as Cassius pulled the spirit crystal she had gifted him from beneath the fabric of his opened shirt, proudly displaying it for all to see. “Where you will stand by my side, where you belong.”

Her head sank into her hands as soon as the demon stepped through the hell-gate, followed closely by a defeated Jez, the Herald himself appearing as if he were on the verge of breaking.

“Sarratum-sa, what’ve you done?”

She was shocked to see a tear roll down Agate’s cheek, leaving Amara to wonder if it had been spilled over the loss of her sister, or her own betrayal. Without a priestess, Asurim would fade.

“I won’t ask for forgiveness.”

She stiffened when another’s arms closed around her shoulders, not as warm, not as strong, but a comforting nonetheless. “Will it work? Will it keep him safe?”

Giving in to exhaustion she let her head drop to Agate's shoulder when her attendant came to sit beside her, both staring at the dying flames within the hearth.

"Yes… the Demon King will live."

81

PUNISHMENT ENOUGH

"FIGHT BACK!" CASS ROARED AND THE INFERNAL FIEND BEFORE HIM shrunk back even more.

Fucking cowardly lot of them.

He'd inadvertently crushed the mind of the last one, and since then the participation had turned half-assed at best.

He was wired, buzzing from all the corruption down here in the pits, overfed with no outlet.

A daughter. How was he supposed to raise a daughter in the corruption that was the Nessus?

He raised his sword, prepared to give no quarter. He wouldn't fight, then he was no good for anything. That was a pit fiend's entire purpose. They were soldiers, period.

How was he supposed to trust himself to not become as his father was?

"Please, my King, have mercy." The fiend dropped his sword, his eyes warily taking in the strewn corpses Cass had left in his wake, some of them still alive, yet missing vital parts of their essence.

They should've put up more of a fight.

"Cassius," he heard someone call, it took him a moment to locate Azadiel through the sea of black and red uniformed soldiers. The demon was the only one wearing a suit, black on black, with golden hair shining in the red haze.

Cass lowered his sword and the fiend he'd been 'fighting' scampered away.

He still hadn’t had his promised talk with Azadiel, and today of all days he didn’t have the patience to listen to groveling and excuses. He was outraged.

You’d reduce me to nothing more than one of your concubines. He would not be denied what he was owed.

“They aren’t going to fight you, you’re their King,” Azadiel said, frowning as he took in the disaster.

“Will you?” Cass was burning inside, knew it probably showed in his physical appearance. Most notable were his eyes, hellfire constantly blazing in their ebony depths.

Azadiel cracked a grin. “Your Herald is a mess, and no one else was willing to approach you.” He raised one brow in a condescending arch. “I’m not here to fight.”

Okay, perhaps he’d been a little unsteady.

Pure and innocent. Curious and mischievous. *She’ll have your smile.* Mara’s description of his future child haunted him. How was he to protect something so pure?

“I need…” Cass said, taking in a deep breath. Something. He needed *something*.

“I know.” Azadiel said, true compassion shining in his eyes, “Come now, your Mara will be here soon to see to her General. You don’t want her to see you like this?”

Cass’s mind flashed back to a different time, different place—with the same demon.

He cupped the flames in his palms, his body shaking not from the exertion but from the restraint. Hellfire wasn’t meant to be tamed.

“*Come now, Cassius. Should I be teaching this to your warlock instead?” Azadiel sat on the chair in front of the rug Cass sat on.*

“*She can call up hell-flames?” She was truly worthy of him in every way.*

Azadiel shook his head with a rueful grin. “That is something you and only two others are capable of. It shouldn’t *be something you can wield.”*

“*Yet here I am.” He gave Az a cocky grin. “I can teach her?”*

“*It’s enough that she can call on the power of the Hells. Cunning creature that she is.” Pride filled Azadiel’s smile. “Though I think her mastery of the Hell-powers is less of a consideration for her. I doubt she has any intention on ever returning should she be freed.”*

The hell-flames bolted up from his hands and for a moment, all he could do was concentrate, to get it back under control.

"She'll have to return. She's to be my consort, and one day I'll be King. She'll be expected to rule from here. By my side."

"Cass." Azadiel leaned forward as though to lecture him again about hubris, then seemed to think better of it, giving his head a sad shake instead. "I don't know that there's anything she wouldn't do for you."

"Can we go see her now?" Cass scowled down at the liquid flame in his hands. He'd been holding it for so long now, surely long enough to appease Az.

"Yes." Azadiel grinned and stood, sliding a book from the shelves. "We're going to work more on our English today. It's all well and good for the two of you to speak Sumerian to one another while you're here, but once you're out there, you'll need to know the more common tongues."

He didn't care what they did, as long as he got to be next to her.

Cass nodded and let the hellfire dissipate, his hand reaching into his pocket, stroking the scrap of silk that had been there since she'd gifted it to him when they were mere children.

He blinked back to the present, his hand reaching for his pocket, feeling for something that was no longer with him. Azadiel studied him closely, tensed as though anticipating an attack.

"She's going to be upset," Cass said, nodding as he sheathed his sword, trying to shake off that urgent feeling that was riding him. He was forgetting something. He needed to find it...

"I better go shower."

"Cassius." Azadiel fell into step beside him, the familiarity of the two of them walking these paths leaving Cass unsettled. "Whatever you remember, know that I wasn't given the entire truth myself. I truly did want the two of you to make it."

Cass closed his eyes at the searing pain that hit his chest. "Yes, well, that's not ever going to happen now. So, thank you, and thanks to your overlord, the Nessus is in no danger of having a Queen to rule any time soon. Or ever."

"Levistus has his reasons." Azadiel stared straight ahead, but Cass could see his scowl, even in profile.

Cass was dead inside. There was nothing left in him to give credence to the emotions involved in other's decisions, none of it made sense to him

and all of it hurt.

The comforting ease he felt walking alongside Azadiel was ironically making him uncomfortable. More determined to remember.

He remembered him and his assat, leaning shoulder to shoulder on opposite sides of her bars, their heads resting against them, each with one leg stretched out, their positions a perfect mirror of the others', sharing the heat of their bodies. He remembered the tingling warmth buzzing through him.

And Azadiel.

Sitting on a chair, holding a book while they tried to pay attention to their lessons when all they wanted was to be alone and wrapped in each other. Well, as close as they could get with the iron bars separating them.

Azadiel with his pointless and absurd lessons about all the lesser gods. For her, to spend even one extra moment with her, he'd sit through anything. How her eyes would gleam every time she learned of a goddess that would be sympathetic to her plight. But she had to know he was enough to save her?

With a growl, he shook off the memories.

He hadn't been enough, obviously. And now thanks to the meddling of these accursed gods he'd never get the chance to be. She was his queen, and yet he could offer her nothing but shame.

The minute he stepped back into his fortress he was reminded why he left. Jez's pain was suffocating. The maelstrom of emotions hit all at once, obliterating his own anger and replacing it with his herald's. Because overall, that's what Jez was feeling, cold, brutal anger. As long as Leira lived, Jez wouldn't be able to properly grieve. Mara had stated similar reasons for not taking the potion she had given him. Vengeance and anger could be powerful motivators.

He sped up, leaving Azadiel behind as he ran to find his herald.

Jez was sitting on the floor in front of the marble stand that held Dravite's casket, his head leaning back against the soft yet unforgiving stone. A proper metaphor for the Warlock in life.

Cass plunked right down beside him, settling his hand over his.

"She made me laugh," Jez said, his voice as expressionless as his face. "For the first time, since…"

Cass slid closer. "I think you made her laugh too."

Jez nodded. “I suppose having joy in my existence will be out of my reach. I was sent here to be punished, after all.”

Cass bristled at that. He’d grown up here, had been an innocent child here, what had he done to elicit that same ‘punishment’?

“It’s not, Jez,” Cass said, his teeth bared. “Not a punishment. A different way to live, that’s all.”

“I haven’t seen anyone truly happy since I’ve been here,” Jez said, moving his hand so it wrapped all the way around Cass’s.

“And they are where you come from?” Happiness was an abstract idea to Cass. He’d had enough fleeting encounters with it to recognize that it does exist, but never a firm enough grasp to understand the feeling of it.

Jez shrugged. “I thought so. Perhaps no one truly is.”

“She’s at peace now,” he squeezed Jez’s hand. “Her soul will be forged anew, a new beginning. We can give her that at least.”

Jez nodded sadly, and they sat there for a few moments in absolute silence, each feeling the other’s emotions. Their bond was an odd sort of relief to Cass. Sometimes he didn’t know what he was feeling, and Jez always seemed to understand.

“Cass?” Jez said, turning his head to face him. “Will you go deal with your bitch? She’s insisting she be allowed to attend today’s ceremony, and I really don’t think Levistus has it in him to say no to her. Not since he found out… you know.”

Cass closed his eyes as a fresh wave of rage burned through him.

If he’d had his way, Leira would’ve been locked in a cell. A comfortable one, but one where he wouldn’t be tripping on her and constantly reminded. But no. Apparently, that was his heir, and it already gave her rights above her standing.

His *daughter*.

“Yeah Jez, I’ll deal with that.” He’d lock her in her fucking bedroom if he had to, she was not coming to the funeral of the woman she killed. Dravite would receive every honor, just as he had promised to her sister and her queen.

82

BLEEDING OF THE SOUL

"I'M CARRYING THE KING'S HEIR." HE HEARD LEIRA'S SHOUTS DOWN THE hall, from his private rooms. "That gives me more say than any of you!"

Anger ripped through him, mostly self-directed. Was there anything he wouldn't give to go back and do things differently? He would've taken his Priestess right on the floor of her temple if he'd known the outcome of that night. Her belly would've swollen with his seed, that would have been right. His children were meant to be carried by her. His daughter was meant to have her eyes.

Leira had stolen that from him.

There was not a shred of pity in his soul for her plight.

He was going to have a child from someone unworthy to carry it…

"*A vessel barely worthy of my seed*," his father's snide tone floated up through his mind.

Had his mother been of the same ilk? Was that why his father had barely tolerated him?

He stopped his headlong pace for his room and stood there a moment, just processing. It wasn't the child's fault. He would never be like his father. He would be stronger than that.

Had to be.

The unfairness of everything made his insides churn. The little bitch of a concubine had weaseled her way into his bed and was now carrying his child. Actually, Bas had brought her to his bed.

He saved that thought to explore later.

With his anger pushed down, he calmly entered his room. Leira was there, facing off Levistus and two guards, waving a silver pitcher in her hands to ward them off.

Cass's entrance distracted them all, everyone dropping into a more relaxed stance. Then Leira started sobbing hysterically, and his jaw clenched.

And clenched harder when she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly.

"There now, love." He rose his brows at Levistus as he patted her back, peeling her off and holding her by the shoulders as he looked down at her. "Having difficulties?"

She sobbed, then ran the top of her sleeve under one eye then the other.

"I just want to be at your side." She whined, and it grated on his nerves.

"Now that's just not going to happen. Not today." Cass moved his hands down to her waist. "You might be with child, but you're not my consort." He bent over whispering in her ear, "and you won't ever be. Take what small kindness I'm offering and stay to your rooms today."

Her body stiffened, and she glared at him.

"I carry your heir." Her hand wandered down her belly. "The future of your rule rests in my womb. You don't get to threaten me." Her hand balled up, hitting her stomach, and with a snarl, he grabbed them both and pushed them behind her back.

"You threaten my child again," he growled in outrage, "and I'll see to it you are chained by your neck and force-fed for the duration." His daughter deserved better than her as a mother.

He passed her off to Levistus's guards. "See her to her rooms, the door is to remain locked, and she's not to be left alone."

"Cassius!" she cried.

"Don't," he growled at her and stalked off into the shower.

He dressed carefully. Sedately. Combed his hair back from his face. All the while his heart raced. She was coming here.

Hells but his masochistic streak would be his undoing.

Craving the sight of her, even knowing it was going to cut like a thousand tiny blades slowly bleeding him out.

He clasped her amulet around his neck and the unending conflict in his mind stopped gnawing at him. Calmed, as though by her presence.

He needed her; it wasn’t even in question. Maybe she would forgive him for such blatant betrayal of his promises, the ones he could remember. He gave his head a good shake. Stupid of him, when he couldn’t even remember all that he’d promised.

They were gathering in his courtyard, more warlocks that had ever been granted access to the Nessus. He and Levistus had devised a protective barrier that would keep the worst of the mind-rotting corruption of the Nessus at bay, the infernal magick a constant hum in the back of his mind.

Then he saw her and nearly lost all his concentration.

Cold and aloof. This was the Priestess here, not his Mara.

She turned at his approach and for a flash of a moment, she let him see all her true feelings. Raw pain. The kind that erodes you from inside, never letting up.

The sight of it had him wrapping his arms around her, resting his chin on the top of her head, as they melted into one another, just breathing. She fit so perfectly it was a shock to the system.

“Death is not lightly welcomed by our kind,” Cass said, sighing against her hair.

She laughed, but it was more of a sob. “Death,” she spat out, “is not welcomed at all.”

“My Mara,” he whispered, running his hand down her hair, “questioning the audacity of death itself.”

“Someone has to, I’ve known it to be neither fair nor just” She leaned into him, their bodies fully entwined.

He rocked her side to side, swaying gently, lost in their own little bubble while the world moved along around them.

“Sarratum-sa.” Oberith approached, bursting their bubble of intimacy. “They’re awaiting you to begin the rites.”

Amara’s body tensed, pulling back to look at Cass’s face. His fingertips ran across her brow, easing the lines of tension. Her nimble fingers went to her amulet at his neck, trying to tuck it under the collar of his shirt.

He snatched up her hand, pressed a kiss to her palm and settled it over her sigil on his chest, the marks near to touching sparking a warmth that bled through to his soul.

Her eyes closed, and she took in a deep breath and unconscious step closer to him. As if fearing he would let go, he wouldn't. Not again.

"You'll summon the hell-flames for her?" Amara asked, even as she steeled herself for what was to come.

"I would be honored to," Cass whispered back before releasing her.

She wasn't his. She had reminded him of that fact.

She should be.

He should be walking up there with her, standing at her side to support her as she blessed her fellow warlock, and probably friend, back to her essence.

And why couldn't he?

It's my right.

His eyes narrowed as he took in the milling crowd. He was over-ruler over all of them. His Priestess needed him.

He grabbed her hand as she started walking away, pulled her back to his side, twining his fingers through hers and falling into step beside her.

He didn't care what kind of message this sent.

His Mara needed him. She hid it well, but he was finally learning how to break her through her veneer and could feel how close she was to breaking. The sigil on his chest was warm, she was calling to him from some level of her being. And damned be the Hells, Asurim and the rest of the realms — he would come to her.

They passed Jez and Agate, supporting each other, each enduring agony of their own. He and Mara both ignored the disapproving glare of Levistus and Oberith's gaping expression when he caught sight of the amulet around Cass's neck. And noted the open approval from Azadiel, which eased his anger towards their former teacher. At least he'd spoken truth in having wanted for them to succeed.

He let Mara lead the way. He stayed behind her, his hand on her back, just enough of a presence so she knew he would be there to help her remain strong.

83

MAY THE FIRE GUIDE YOUR PATH

"HAIL SISTER, HAIL WARRIOR, HAIL WARLOCK.

I send the warmth of the blazing sun to you,
I send the beauty of the radiant moon to you,
I send the comfort of the shining stars to you,
All to keep you company on your long journey."

Each word fell heavy from her lips as Amara blessed the spirit of one who had gifted her loyalty and unexpected kindness.

Even when Amara had doubted her own actions, Dravite had been steadfast, convinced her Sarratum would somehow save Asurim and restore them to their rightful place among the more powerful beings of the realms. That was the trouble with prophecies, too many ways to interpret them. Yet where most feared her, Dravite had believed in her.

There was no denying she was weakened. She couldn't hide from the gnawing pain of loss this day, she tried, but there was simply too much of it. The only reason she didn't break was the demon at her side, he was her anchor. Sin knew she was weakened, and rather than use that knowledge against her, he caught her.

The blade of her athame slid across sensitive fingertips, yet she was numb to the sting as drops of crimson welled up beneath its cut.

“ May these protections ward your path as you travel through the lands of Kur on your journey to the garden of the gods.”

With great care she used her own blood to draw the mandatory protection runes upon Dravite’s forehead, infusing her magick into every symbol, blessing her with every rite she knew.

“ May the fire we light in your name guide your path, as you re-enter the dark lands from which you came. In the gardens, your spirit will rest Er-Dravite, until your life’s flame sparks again, and you rise from the ashes once more.”

She didn’t realize she completed her task until his warm hand closed over hers, gently pulling her back before wrapping his arm around her waist then tucking her protectively to his side.

Amara’s fingers weaved through his as Er-Agate stepped forward to press a kiss upon her sister’s cold lips, then placing Dravite’s own athame above the general’s still heart.

Everyone assembled within the courtyard looked forlorn, but perhaps none more so than the sole celestial who stood present among the demons and warlocks.

Cassius whispered softly in ear, “his first love.”

“Hers as well I’m told.”

Jez’s expression had altered since last she’d seen him. Where pain had darkened the green depths of his eyes, anger now radiated, highlighting their blue and gray tones. She couldn’t blame him for settling on anger rather than grief; loss, and rage both consumed the soul, but rage was the easier to bear. It gave purpose the chaos which built within.

He gave her an encouraging nudge against her back, her attention snapping back towards Agate as her attendant rejoined her side.

“The time has come to send Dravite home.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, turning it to press a kiss against her palm, against his mark.

“Then let us light her way.”

She could vaguely make out the gasps and murmurs rolling through the crowd when the realization struck that the Demon King himself would be lighting a Warlock pyre. Summoning the purest fire of the Hells to honor the fallen general, bestowing upon her general an honor reserved for only the highest ranking members of the demonarchy.

She could sense the outrage rippling through the attending members. Their shock nearly matching that of her Dominae when they discovered the crystal prominently displayed around the Demon King's neck. Unknowingly flaunting proof of her treason.

Their Sarratum had knowingly placed the sin-eater before her duties, chosen his life over the survival of her realm and people.

They would be furious with her, feel betrayed. She understood and would accept their anger, but she wouldn't change course. She had sworn to protect him before ever taking up the crown and responsibilities of Sarratum. Despite the many broken promises between them, this one she would keep.

She looked on with a sense of detachment as he placed his hands upon Dravite's, then bowed her own head, as the large entourage of warlocks who attended the ceremony took a knee.

Most were elite warriors within the General's battalion, masters of dark magicks. Warriors, men and women who Dravite herself had trained, who had waged wars alongside the General and claimed victories under her command.

Bright blue flames sparked from within the wooden pyre, Hellfire rising up at the summons of its king. It expanded quickly, greedily consuming the birch wood brought from Gaia and the flowers and herbs which served to soften Dravite's bed upon the pyre.

The demon had done his research well; birch wood represented rebirth, the plants he had selected were spikenard, a valerian plant which stood symbol for the phoenix, while the scent of valerian itself eased the dead during their transition between lives. Holly and sage were added, their purpose to banish obstructions and clear the path before her.

She'd been surprised to find flowers tucked among the herbs, not a tradition to their kind, but smiled, understanding the demon's reason for it. He ordered white gardenias as a symbol of life renewed, and purple lilacs for a first love lost.

She took his hand into hers once he finally stepped back to rejoin her side; he'd done Dravite proud, she couldn't be more grateful for it.

The bright blue flames transformed into a radiant gold when they moved to lay claim upon Dravite's remains. All in attendance gazed on in silence as, with an angered *'whoosh'*, the individual flames joined as one, turning the dark sky bright with shades of orange and red, lighting up the path for Dravite's final journey.

From somewhere within the crowd, a mournful cry rang out, one usually heard on the battlefield for a fallen comrade. The cry was joined by others, the mournful chants of her warriors following Dravite into Kur, where she would journey to cross the veil into the Garden of the Gods to await Samsara and be reborn.

The roar of fire and the mournful cries of those who grieved for Dravite made for a tragic melody, nearly causing her to miss the unexpected sound of an enraged growl, her gaze shooting up to the celestial in surprise.

Her stomach dropped and her back stiffened, her focus intent on her magick as it rose in anger at the discovery of the reason for his rage.

The Herald's voice sounded different, hollowed and full of barely contained menace. "You have no right to show your face here Leira."

Her blonde hair spilled down from beneath an ornate crown, her head held high as she made her way towards Cassius. The Erinyes had the audacity to attend wearing royal garb, clad in the black and crimson colors of Cassius's insignia.

Her features a mask of indifference as she passed the celestial, "I've come to stand by my King's side, as is expected from his Queen and consort."

The sin-eater stiffened at her side, and Amara didn't need to reach for her magick to sense the anger radiating through him. The foolish demoness was not only risking her own life by causing a scene but that of his unborn daughter.

Amara's fingers wove through his, allowing her power to gently siphon away the agony Leira's sudden arrival caused the demon. His response to her far more volatile than she had expected, Leira's presence eliciting physical pain from him.

"Easy on demon, most present here remain unaware it was she who ended Dravite's life…"

Her gaze moved over the suspicious expressions upon the faces of her Dominae, and confused looks which were being exchanged between the warriors present within the courtyard.

“I suggest we do our best to keep it that way.”

That intention was lost at the sight of Agate’s rage-filled expression, which momentarily distracted her from the rapid accumulation of energy her attendant was summoning.

“Oh, shit.”

A blast of dark magick struck out, black tendrils morphing into green flames as they rushed the Erinyes. Hexafire.

Forcing her own magic to obey rather than attack she invoked a barrier around the foolish Erinyes, her only thought on the child she carried.

Agate was owed her vengeance, and Amara wanted very much to see her attendant claim it for herself and her sister, yet was left with little choice but intervene as Agate lunged for the Erinyes.

“Agate, SABATU!” *Relent.*

The spell was imbued with far more persuasion than intended, her magick instantly compelling her attendant into obedience. The sudden stop in momentum threw Agate off balance, sending her tumbling backward upon the platform.

Rather than show a sign of intelligence by retreating, Leira’s large eyes took on a sheen of gleeful malice as moved to stand before a downed and power bound Agate.

“Stay in your in place, warlock.”

Only the thought of Cassius unborn child halted Amara’s own strike again the demoness. “I’ve changed my mind and decided Leira can keep her pretty head. As soon as the babe is born, I’ll be gifting her to the Arachnae instead.”

The Arachnae were spider hybrids brought to life by dark magick, tasked to guard the dungeons throughout the nine dominions, and had gained swift notoriety for the gruesome death they offered. Once trapped in their web, they mated with their victim and forced them to ingest their eggs. This cycle repeated for a few weeks, until the eggs hatched and the baby Arachnae ate their way out.

The sin-eater surely heard her threat but appeared to have little objection to her suggestion. Yet when Amara moved to defend Agate, his grip on her hand tightened, alerting her to Jez’Piel’s approach.

“Let him handle this before we escalate things any further.”

Wings the color of black ink spread wide, shielding Agate while barely avoiding the raging fire of the burning pyre. His sword drawn and pressed against the throat of the foolish Erinyes.

“Leave, before I decide that killing you is worth my surrender to corruption.”

Jez’s voice was chilled with menace and left Amara with little doubt that if Leira didn’t soon move, the Arachnae would find themselves disappointed.

“Wussudru…” *Release*.

The command instantly released the hold she kept over Agate, both looking on as her attendant jumped up, not to attack the demoness but to wrap her arms around Jez’s waist to try to pull his much larger from away from both the Erinyes and the fire, saving him from his own actions.

“Angel, don’t... my sister wouldn’t have wanted such a fate for you.”

That’s all it took for Jez to relent, hanging his head in shared loss.

Gazing over the courtyard it was clear that a stir had begun to build among the crowd, finding a sea of eyes following the developments upon the platform, their expressions ranging from shock to suspicion and outrage. Despite the efforts to remain calm and composed, it seemed that the situation was already escalating.

As if to seal this fact, a squadron of demon soldiers came rushing up the platform in full battle regalia. Amara didn’t recognize any of them beneath their steel helmets, but their black armor and crimson banners declared them belonging to the elite guard of the Nessus.

“Demon, what’s the meaning of this?”

He looked as bewildered as she was, yet before the sin-eater composed himself enough to speak, the soldiers moved to form a wall between them and Leira. This would’ve been laughable had they not done so while raising their weapons at Amara in a show of public hostility, and through her, the realm of Asurim itself.

“Who ordered this? Stand down, you *idiots*.”

She could barely make out the commanding voice of Levistus over the chaos that erupted within the courtyard. The moment the swords had been raised against their Sarratum, Dravite’s battalions had set to rush the platform even as the attending members of the demonarchy turned on them.

The tight grip she held on the sin-eater's hand fell away when she was forcefully pulled back, only to be crushed within a wall of bodies. Within moments her own Dominae stood gathered around her in a defensive formation, shielding both her and Agate from the perceived threat.

Shouts and threat rang out over a courtyard which ought to have been filled with prayer. Rather than peacefully sending her general to the beyond, the energy of violence filled the air around her, and that sense of control Amara had been clinging onto—slipped.

"ENOUGH!"

That tempestuous surge of power which had been building intensity since Leira's entrance was expelled from her with the resonance of thunder. With a firm grip, Amara held Agate upright as magick discharged from her like a lightning bolt burrowing into basalt stone. Its energy reverberated through the air, knocking all those crowding the platform onto the ground. After a moment it was only them, the sin-eater, the Dominae of Asurim and the demon Princes of Hell who were left standing.

"Guys, some room, please?"

She forced a deep breath into her lungs when slowly the Dominae began to break formation, giving her some much-needed air. With the exception of the occasional corset, small and constrictive just didn't work for her. A few more breaths brought her focus back, and her gaze searched then found that of the sin-eater, noting the dangerous glint within those cold eyes. He looked ready to commit murder.

Needing satisfaction for Dravite's treatment, it was Amara who now loomed over a downed and beaten Leira as the Erinyes struggled to scramble up from the floor in all her finery, the ill-fitting crown comically skewed upon her head. When she nearly managed to balance herself, Amara stepped forward once more and let the heel of her boot sink into the back of Leira's hand.

"Know your place, Erinyes… and leave," she kept her tone to a hiss, not trusting her voice as she released her.

As if on command, fat tears began to collect inside those overly large eyes before running down perfectly sculpted cheeks.

"It's not fair, this *is* my place. I belong with the father of my unborn child, I belong at Cassius's side."

It was not by accident that she pitched her voice loud enough to carry across the platform into the courtyard.

It was in that moment Amara realized this was the reason why Leira had come to disrupt the ceremony; she wanted an audience to announce her condition, making it public knowledge. The Erinyes had used Dravite's funeral as a stage to claim her right as Queen Consort before the demonarchy.

Within seconds the cacophony of shouts and screams recommenced, then picked up intensity. Leira's stunt had not only succeeded in winning her the support of the demonarchy, but confirmed her identity as Dravite's murderer to the Asurians in attendance. Within the courtyard fights were breaking out among the large crowd, pandemonium erupting where moments ago there had been peace.

Already Levistus and Aza were on damage control, Levistus trying to calm the demon nobles, while Aza tried to negotiate terms with her Dominae, yet neither of them appeared to be booking much success.

"Leira, I ordered you to stay in your room, what's the meaning of this?" The deceptively calm voice came up from her side, it's warm and sleepy drawl belying the menace she sensed roiling within the sin-eater.

Pinning the demoness a final glare Amara stepped back as to let the Demon deal with his maddened consort, only to have her escape thwarted when that step caused her to back into a warm, solid chest.

"I've made it abundantly clear that I do not accept you as my consort, nor will you be made Queen of the Nessus."

Strong fingers moved over the flare of her hip, both an intimate gesture and bold declaration, yet his next words were spoken low enough for only her to hear, "both titles have already been claimed."

"Sin…"

Leira's watery gaze turned murderous seething when following the movement of his hand.

"*I* carry your heir, therefore *I* am Consort and Queen." The shrill pitch of her voice was easily picked up even over the conflict and chaos within the courtyard. "This is the first royal event since conception, I demand to be present and introduced."

"This is a ritual of mourning, you feeble-minded creature, one you're to blame for. I'm sure you thought the idea of interrupting the ceremony to demand your due to be a stroke of genius, but you now find yourself surrounded by veteran battalions of master warlocks who at the moment would like nothing better than to see you torn apart limb by limb, and

tossed upon that pyre in offering to their general. Go, before I change my mind and let them have you."

Warm breath flowed along her ear and nape, and gods forgive her reprobate ways, for even under these circumstances she shivered with need when his lips brushed the curve of her ear while addressing the guards who had moved to stand directly behind Leira.

"Take her back to her room and make sure she stays there this time."

"You can't do this! I am your consort by law!"

Leira's blue gaze had taken on a feverish sheen, the madness of corruption which radiated from within those angelic eyes the only warning she got before the Erinyes lunged.

She didn't get far, before she even had the chance to summon a counter strike the demon's strong fingers closed around Leira's throat, holding the infuriated female at bay as she continued to try clawing her way towards Amara. As futile as her attack would've been it would similarly have been disastrous, had the mad Erinyes succeeded in drawing blood, Leira's life would've been forfeit, with it that of his daughter.

"Demon, one of these days we really ought to discuss your tendency of sticking your dick in crazy…"

She felt a weight press down on her head, stunned to realize he had just pressed a kiss on the top of her head. "You should meet the one I plan to wife someday."

With a half turn, he stepped away, effectively placing himself between her and the furious Erinyes held within his grasp.

"You'll not force my hand by causing a public scene, Leira. And I won't allow you to further insult my guests. Apologize to the Lady Agate and to Queen Amara for the insults you've given here today."

"Never!" Her impressive defiance losing much of its impact squeezed out through her obstructed airway as it was.

As satisfying as the sight of the demon choking the life out of the crazed creature was, it didn't help to ease the mounting tension and outrage among the crowd. The platform beneath their feet shook as the Asurian and Demonic battalions waged war around them.

"Sin, you can't kill her. We need to stop this before it escalates into warfare."

As soon as he released her, a plaintive sob broke free from Leira's pouty lips, followed by more tears.

“I don’t understand... I carry your heir, and I wear the ring you gave me.”

“You buying jewelry now demon? I’m almost offended, a century working together I always have to loot my own trinkets and...”

The rest of her words fell away when her eyes found the ring in question, its design possibly the most exquisite she ever beheld.

The piece had been designed in golden bands inlaid with cut imperial garnet and blood ruby, the deep orange and dark crimson laid out like flames looping around her dainty finger before enveloping a singular stone. Although diamonds were common as dirt in Hell, this stone was different. The shimmering crystal looked a deep midnight blue, a mesmerizing black yet the most subtle of movements made it core spark to life with blue fire.

It inspired memories of enthralling dark magicks, and magnificent wings forged of blue fire. Her nose scrunched up in distaste, shame for such a treasure to be wasted on the Erinyes.

“He accepts your crystal yet places a ring upon another’s finger? This offense will not stand!”

Amara groaned inwardly as she recognized the sound of Ravanna’s outraged voice. As brazen as she was clever, there was little doubt in her mind Domina Ravanna had been among the first to figure out the crystal’s significance.

As Ravanna reached for the crystal hanging around the sin-eater’s neck, instinct took over, and her magick lashed out.

“Oh, no.” Her gaze was filled with horror when power struck her Domina head on, and Ravanna crumpled onto the basalt stone. “Malachi, See to her… I didn’t intend for…”

A persistent humming noise halted her words, her senses instantly on alert to the growing threat as energy mounted.

“Sin?”

She took a step to join his side, yet her feet faltered the moment her gaze locked on him. Her hands began to shake, her mouth going dry with fear when looking into those cold, cruel eyes that didn’t belong to her demon, but to his creator.

“*Asmodeus*…”

Mara couldn’t hear the words he spoke to Leira, but she didn’t need to, for she already knew them by heart. They had been spoken once upon

another life, a promise made by a different demon, given to a different girl.

One day I'll make a proper ring for you, assat-shi, one beautiful enough that all the realms will instantly know that you belong with me.

The rock ground beneath her feet began to quake.

84

THEN BEG.

THE GROUND SHOOK. THE WALLS TREMBLED. A CRACK SOUNDED OFF WITH the blinding snap of a shotgun report, then another.

Cass noticed none of it.

His attention was narrowed intently on the ring that the Erinyes wore proudly on her pale hand.

Wrong.

Her smile floated up to his mind's eye, blindingly beautiful. Assat-shi. She would be his consort, together they would set the world on fire.

His hand tightened. Another loud crack shot through the room.

Molten lava bubbled up through the cobblestone ground, blue waves of flame licking over the stones. Claws dug into his arm, grasping desperately.

He fussed over that ring for days. Designed it with her in mind. He was no artist, every meticulous detail he'd drawn had been a test of his patience. For her. He would put every aspect of his very soul into it…

"Let her go, Cass." Jez was there, he hadn't even noticed him approach.

Cass still held Leira in his grasp.

He dropped her, prepared to face down the angel. This was none of his concern.

"You can't mean to make her your queen!" The Erinyes screeched from the ground, her voice hoarse. "She's a *warlock*," she spat out the word as though it were filthy.

Wings flared to life at his back, flaming and throwing off oppressive heat.

He knelt beside her, his eyes on his herald. Warning him off.

Jez growled, his arms wrapping around a furious bundle of rage as she lunged for Leira once more. Agate. Dravite's sister.

Cass should let her finish the Erinyes off.

He grasped Leira's hand and plucked off the ring, tucking it safely into his pocket, his hand circling her throat once more.

"I'll make you regret every one of your trespasses against me." He growled in her face, his rage swamping the room, sucking back the essences of everyone in attendance.

"For your insult to my Priestess, I will make you beg," he snarled.

Shouts and yelling were coming from all around him, vile slurs tossed back and forth between his people and hers.

No. United, the Realms would kneel at their feet. It was the only way they were strong enough… together.

"*Your power Cassius,*" his Priestess was saying in his mind. *"Feeds off mine. Together, we'll be strong enough to overthrow your father."*

"*And I'm just to trust you at your word?" He threw back. She was a wild, feral creature, but yes, he could taste the power she fed him.*

She pressed her hand against the bars, and some part of him gave into an urge so strong it was instinct—he pressed his hand up to his side of the bars.

She gasped and closed her eyes, not speaking for a moment.

"*No, Prince of Lust, we don't rely on promises that are merely words. We'll enter a binding contract, seared into each other's flesh and souls."*

His mind rolled back to another memory, another lifetime.

"*Because together, the two of us are strong enough," he whispered urgently, their palms pressed together, and fingers entwined. "I promise you, once we're free there'll be nothing that can stop us, even if I have to set all the world on fire. We'll sit on our thrones and watch from the center of the flames."*

"*Az told me the Warlock realm is dying." She leaned in closer to the bars. "I don't know if I'll even a realm to call home."*

Cass lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "No matter where we go, I'll be your home, and if needs be, I'll craft you a throne with my bare hands from the rubble of the destruction we'll leave in our wake."

He roared with rage when his mind flashed back to the present, blindly taking in the destruction and fighting around him.

Destroy it all. Rebuild it to his will.

He noticed a scattering of warlocks and some of his demons falling to their knees. Was the ground still shaking? Or was that his body?

“Cassius, enough!” Levistus yelled loud enough Cass could hear it above the droning in his ears.

Cass looked up, his eyes magnetized to hers. Mara. How was he supposed to be strong enough for her when he couldn’t even keep his own life in control? He roared with outrage, his hand tightening even more. Leira let out a squeak before her body went limp.

Mara’s eyes were wide, her body frozen. She was looking at him with… fear?

He looked down at Leira’s limp form. Her chest still rose and fell.

He called out to his guards, “take her. Lock her in a five by five cell and toss the fucking key.” He ran his hands into his hair.

Mara’s gasp shot through his head as though she whispered it directly into his ear.

Levistus was tugging at her arm, finally wrapping his arm around her waist and steering her back to a portal.

Running from him. Because he’d frightened her.

His mind rolled back, the fear in her eyes screaming in a way she could no longer. Beyond terror, beyond pain; she was trying to convey unspeakable horrors and his mind refused to comprehend.

He needed to go after her.

She was leaving him?

She was afraid *of him.* What had he done?

He was dragged back and lifted to his feet, Azadiel’s hands on his shoulders, his concerned azure eyes drilling into Cass’s.

“... army surrounding the courtyard, Cass. Focus, please.” Az said, giving him a shake.

Cass finally turned, taking in all the destruction. His courtyard was split down the center, a river of lava more than a foot wide running through it.

His sister stood at the entrance, surrounded by multitudes of soldiers clad in red leather.

“I see your concubine liked your gift,” Glasya sneered, waving her hand to advance her guard. “I saw to it she received it with your regards, brother dearest.”

Cass heard the singing of metal as Azadiel unsheathed his sword. Cass hadn’t worn his. It was a funeral, he’d been following protocol. He hadn’t wanted to aggravate the tenuous relationship with the warlocks.

The void inside of him had been dangerously close to the surface since he’d watched Mara disappear through the portal. Now it felt as though it would swallow him whole.

Raze it to ash. Nothing left worth losing.

Without conscious thought, his power reached out, greedily seeking sustenance. More. Always more.

The world would kneel at his feet.

With a roar, he threw up his hands, hell-flames flaring to life all around them, Glasya’s soldiers breaking down into boneless heaps as he absorbed their very essences, the hellfire he was calling up burning through their empty husks.

Glasya stopped, watching her soldiers crumple, fall and burst into pillars of flame. She stepped back, tripping over one of her fallen.

He couldn’t breathe.

“Leave and don’t return,” Jez yelled over the roar of the flames.

“You can’t bar me from the Nessus,” Glasya shrieked, “we have a contract.”

“Wrong.” Jez yelled back, “you and Cassius have one. I can’t bind you, I am merely advising you. If you want your life.”

Cass was lost to it. He needed…

“You can’t kill her Cass,” Azadiel said, his hand cupping Cass’s cheek. “Take a breath, shut it down.”

Cass blinked, Azadiel slowly coming into focus. “She ran from me.”

Azadiel grabbed his hand, leading him back into the fortress, leaving destruction all around him, and Jez facing down Glasya.

“I know Cass. I know.” Azadiel kept talking, kept saying his name, reminding him of who he was. More than the dark void inside.

“I told them to lock Leira in a cell.” He staggered, nearly falling to his knees. “In front of my Mara.” His chest heaved.

“I told them to put her in her room,” Azadiel said, grabbing up his arm.

“She left me.” It was too hard to breathe. “Why is she afraid of me?”

Azadiel stepped in front of him and stopped. “There are things you’re better off not remembering.”

He snarled, his chest so tight he couldn’t take in a breath, his heart trying to pound out of his chest.

“I have a right to know my own mind,” he shouted. “I want to know what’s real!” His hands shook, nausea churning—hells his entire body trembled.

“You have to trust me, if you were in her place, if you knew what she knew…” Azadiel kept shooting looks of concern at him. “Do you ever stop to think that perhaps not having your memory is a blessing? That there’s a reason she wants you to remain ignorant to this? Memories are painful Cassius, not only for you.”

Something inside of him broke. He fell against the wall, covering his face with his hand, the sigil on his chest blazing.

“How will I know what not to do if I can’t remember what was done?”

His knees shook, his stomach churned.

He was cast adrift with no anchor.

He had nothing.

Everything strong in him had just walked through that portal.

85

NEVER A SLAVE

A FRIGHTFUL SENSE OF DÉJÀ VU SETTLED AMIDST THE CHAOS, PAST AND present merging before her eyes as her mind seized on memories of a time long passed but never forgotten.

"Take her. Lock her in a five by five cell and toss the fucking key."

There was a celebration in the palace, her birthday, and she felt like a princess dressed in the pink gown her sisters had gifted her.

It was a grand occasion, having reached the mature age of six she would begin her journey towards fulfilling her calling and become 'e Zagmi, the high priestess. Yet the day which had started like a dream had soon revealed itself the beginning of a nightmare from which she failed to wake.

The vibrant pink of her beloved gown had turned a dark maroon, the color fading to red at the edges of the dark stains. It was her fault the pretty dress was ruined, blood had sprayed from opened arteries and rather than move out of the way, fear had kept her rooted in place. Her body was frozen as her mind tried to reconcile the image of her mother's blade sliding across the Sarrum's throat, before being brutally thrust into his skull.

Father?... FATHER!

The palatial hall was in a panic, terrified screams filled the air along with the familiar charge of dark magick. Protections barriers and circles were summoned and failed, light dimmed and from the large windows and balconies, she could see the sky grow dark, not clouds, but wraiths.

Dark magick was useless against beings born from it, she needed to run and hide, but her feet refused to move, her eyes unable to break away from the malevolent specters as they swooped in to drain the essence of their victims, first their magick, then their life. Warlocks and demons, men, women and children, in their hunger for power — the wraiths made no distinction.

She'd never before connected to the realm, but could suddenly sense another presence breach through the barrier of Asurim. Inside her mind she could hear the earth and sky scream in outrage at the unwelcome presence, heralding his arrival, Death had come to Asurim.

Amara had never seen a deity before, knew they were supposed to be imposing to behold, but this one was frightening. His form was bound in burial wrappings, the cloth unable to hide the rotting flesh beneath, a funeral shroud hung draped over his shoulders. The dark fabric flowed out behind him like wings as he moved to stand before her mother, her father's crown levitating off the blood-covered floor and into his hands, where placed it upon her head.

"Long live the Sarratum."

"You've kept your word, and I shall keep mine."

Blood turned to ice when her mother's steel-gray eyes locked on her. The deity turning to follow her line of view, scrutinizing her from behind a steel mask. She hadn't known his name, learning it many years later — Namtar, the Sumerian god of pestilence and death,

"Guards, take the child and harvest her soul for the Death God."

Soldiers in black armor and crimson banners gripped her. And finally, her legs obeyed command as she kicked and screamed, but none were left to help her as she was dragged up the steps to the altar.

"We will see to the sacrifice."

Two acolytes held her down, a third, a being clad in dark blue robes lifted her father's athame dagger above her chest, she clenched her teeth and shut her eyes awaiting the cut, but the blade never struck.

"Your destiny does not end here 'e Zagmi, the prophecy lives."

Before she could open her eyes to see the being who'd spoken, a portal opened beneath her, right as the blade struck down.

A dark and empty void claimed her, and she fell endlessly losing all sense of time and direction. When finally her body struck solid stone, the

very first thing she did was vomit, heaving until her stomach ran empty and the nausea settled. The fear stayed.

A few more breaths, then she forced her wobbly legs into obedience; standing up only to discover herself at the center of an opulent throne room carved from solid gray stone and shiny black crystal. Obsidian, like her mother's blade.

An ostentatious throne stood raised upon a large dais, yet it failed to impress when compared to the being who occupied it. Black wings fully expanded behind him, dark blue eyes wide, his gaze cold and cruel

The death god had been frightening but was nothing compared to the energy she sensed from the Demon King. She'd heard the stories of the Demon King Asmodeus and refused to believe a living being could ever be as fearsome as described. She had been wrong.

"*Take her. Lock her in a five by five cell and toss away the key.*"

A hard shove at her back nearly sent her sprawling, its momentum breaking the grip of memories on her mind. "Amara!"

"Amara snap out of it!" Fingers closed around her upper arm, forcefully pulling her back. Instinct and years of practice had her gripping the hilt of her athame, pulling it free from her waist as she struck out, seeing nothing but those cold dark eyes.

"Amar… BLOODY HELLS!"

The blade cut thickly into the back of Levistus's hand, causing him to instantly release his grip around her upper arm.

Slowly coming out of a daze, Amara spun around in a circle, confused by her surroundings. Not the Palatial halls of Asurim, they were ruins now. Nor was she in the throne room of the Nessus, Asmodeus was gone.

Dravite

This was not the courtyard, there was no pyre, no demon soldiers, no sin-eater. Rather than basalt stone and fire, dark crystal halls and jewel-toned glass windows surrounded her, as well as a plethora of warriors, warlock masters, and Gargoyle nobles. She was back in Asurim. *How?*

She expanded her senses into the realm, instantly on alert. He wasn't here, couldn't sense him... Cass... had he been left behind in the Nessus?

"CASS!"

Summoned by her distress, energy gathered to her, her will already bending it into magick to force open a makeshift portal back to the Nessus, her power faltering as again she was pulled backward, breaking her focus.

“Cutting your hand was a warning Levistus, release me now or gain a stump!” Her demon was alone, he needed her.

“You can’t go back there now, it isn’t safe. Think this through, there can only be one reason for Glasya’s sudden appearance, she’s trying to bait you into an attack,” Levistus roared back.

She rounded on him, pressing onto her toes as to level her furious gaze with his. “Cassius needs help! You saw what happened out there, he barely has control over his own power.”

“Which you’re responsible for. He’s conflicted because of you.”

Their arguing was being drowned out by the yells of the warriors and masters within the hall of the temple, her Dominae moving in a circle formation around herself and the demon prince.

“The Demon King carries her spirit crystal, she’s surrendered the throne of Asurim to the demonarchy!”

“TRAITOR!”

With a solid crack, Dominus Malachi’s fist connected with the jaw of the warlock master who dared declare Amara a traitor.

“You insolent boy, we remain dependent on the infernal energy the demons produce. Sarratum-sa has sacrificed herself in an attempt to unify both realms and this is your gratitude?”

Noble a gesture as that might’ve been, it wasn’t the truth. Her actions hadn’t been selfless, but selfish. The only reason she had surrendered to the crystal had been her desire to save the sin-eater.

“Did that look like unification to you? They pointed their swords at Sarratum-sa — we are at war!” A commander of the Gargoyle battalion called out.

“No one has declared war, we lack the resources and power to wage battle against the Nine Hells.” Logic and strategy were two of Domina Nimue’s many accomplishments, and Amara was glad for it.

“He owns her soul, a demon’s slave is unfit to rule!”

She deserved to be called a traitor, but a slave? Never.

“I’m *not* a slave, I am not property. I’m your Sarratum, and as such, I bend the knee to no one. The Demon King carries a personal gift imbued with my magick, not with my soul.” *Not yet, anyway.*

Her back straightened and her shoulders set in defiance as she stared down all who were in attendance within the temple hall.

“I share your outrage over today’s events but let me be well understood on this—I won’t see Asurim fall to satisfy your thirst for blood. King Cassius and I have reached an understanding, as soon as his heir is safely delivered, the Erinyes will be surrendered to Asurim. Personally, I’d like to see her fed to the Arachnae, but I concede her fate for Er-Agate to decide as is her right, but insist her head be mounted in the arena wall in honor of our fallen general.”

War cries erupted from the warriors in attendance, but it would take more effort to soothe the anger and concerns of the masters. No matter how strong the desire to step through the portal and join the demon, doing so would further encourage gossip, and complicate matters with his current consort.

His consort. Again she felt that singular ache within her chest, another promise broken, another fragment of her shattered heart turned to dust.

Berating her own foolish sentimentality Amara released the gathered energy upon the palm of her hand, she was needed in Asurim. The demon was needed in the Nessus. Her place was not by his side, it never had been and never would be.

“Sarratum?” With a tentative touch, one of her unruly braids was brushed back into place, her eyes coming to rest upon Agate’s tear stricken face.

“I owe you an apology, Agate. We promised to give your sister a glorious send-off. One worthy of her.”

She startled slightly when Agate’s arm curled through her own, a gesture of comfort the same as her sister had offered. It was gentle and strangely intimate, and she allowed it as together they walked towards the steps of the altar where the throne of Asurim sat waiting.

“I have little doubt my sister found her way out of Kur and into the garden of the gods. How could she not, when her path was lit by the King’s fire and her soul warded from harm by your blessings. You ask for forgiveness, but you’ll receive my gratitude instead.”

As soon as Amara lowered herself into the thick furs which softened and warmed the unforgiving jade of her throne, her Dominae assembled to claim the prepared seats to her sides, Agate choosing a spot upon the pillows and furs at her feet.

It was Dominus Oberith who spoke first. “Sarratum-sa, you play a dangerous game, the crystal…”

“Is not up for discussion.” Narrowing her eyes, she glared at each of her nine Dominae, ensuring they all understood that they would find her unyielding in this. Then she realized there were only eight of them in attendance. “Ravanna—was she harmed badly?”

“She’ll be out for a day, maybe two…”

Her stomach dropped, her expression turned horrified. “It was never my intention to cause her injury, she…”

“En-Rasputin declared her perfectly healthy Sarratum, don’t worry yourself.” Domina Elmira looked over to her, the calm of her voice soothing.

“Then, why?”

“Ravanna is a difficult patient,” Domina Nimue stated, hiding her lips behind her hand, but unsuccessful in keeping the humor from her tone.

Amara let out a groan, Ravanna would be furious once she woke. “He nailed her with a tranquilizer dart.”

“Right in the rump, twice!”

Some laughed, other’s let out a suppressed curse. Forget furious, her Domina was going to go on a bloody rampage. The thought causing even Amara’s lips to curl in a faint smile.

“I understand a war cannot easily be won, Sarratum, but we cannot let given offense go unanswered.” Dominus Malachi’s mercurial temper was getting the better of him. Only then would he act rash rather than logical.

“Start a war against my King, and you’ll play directly into Glasya’s hands.”

Levistus had moved to stand before her, keeping the mandatory distance of three steps. No matter their bizarre working relationship, in public, appearances must always be kept. Today had done enough damage, it was up to them to save the peace between Asurim and the Nessus.

“En-Levistus, approach and explain yourself. How is it you believe the actions of a maddened Erinyes is connected to the Archduchess of the Nine Hells?”

“I am surprised that you, with your eye for finery, failed to take notice of the Queen Consort’s attire for the event.”

Amara’s eyes shut tight, a small hiss escaping her lips upon hearing that title used to address the demoness.

“Address her by that title before your King and he’ll have your head for it”

Levistus merely shrugged. “She carries his heir, whether he chooses to accept her or not is of little consequence until the child is born.”

Sitting back, she let her memory rerun Leira’s appearance, the Erinyes had ascended the platform dressed as royalty. Her gown had been a midnight black, the trim at the neck, sleeves, and hem a golden jacquard trim encrusted with rubies. The monarch train attached to her shoulders bore Cassius’s sigil intricately embroidered onto its length with different threads of gold.

Her brows knitted, any time she required an item with such detail work it would take at least two months for the seamstresses to complete. No more than four weeks had passed since Ostara. Which meant the gown hadn’t been made for her.

The crown on her head had been skewed, when custom fitted, a crown should not topple. And the ring, that she knew for certain hadn’t been meant for the Erinyes. Yet somehow it had all ended in Leira’s possession.

“Someone has gone through a great deal of trouble to get Leira ready for the stage… like a puppet in a play. And someone is pulling her strings.”

“That’s my conclusion as well.” Levistus’s tone sounding more bored than intrigued. The puppet master clearly not impressed with his competition.

“If what you say is true, that suggests that every single act, from Leira’s placement in the harem to today’s despicable display has been part of a premeditated strategy. But to what end? Surely the Archduchess knows well enough that neither Cassius nor I would break truce.”

“She aims to force your hand, as you so aptly put it. And nearly succeeded, had blood been drawn on either side today, then neither you nor Cassius would’ve been able to upkeep the truce between your realms.”

She hated the fact that the Demon Prince was being reasonable.

“Asurim has no intention of waging war against the Nessus. In fact, as a public gesture of goodwill, I shall have my own cradle sent to the Nessus. It’s imbued with powerful protection magicks, which will serve the princess well if she’s to live among vipers.”

“You would send your own crib…” Levistus muttered.

“Might as well, I have no use for it. Thank you for your service today En-Levistus, have the wound on your hand seen to by my poison master

before you return to your King's side. I'm sure you'll find your work cut out for you there."

With a deep bow, the Demon Prince made ready to take his leave.

"En-Levistus."

"Priestess?"

He approached the dais when she beckoned, only one small step separating them, the distance close enough to share a whispered conversation.

"Please tell Cassius that I didn't flee from him."

His eyes narrowed while a smug grin curled his sensual lips. "And why would I do something so foolish? The further you two stay apart the safer he remains."

"Because he'll be confused and frightened of his own power after what transpired today, and I'd rather not fuel those sentiments."

He hesitated for a moment weighing her answer. "Not good enough, what else can you offer?"

She glared at him, tilting her head as her teeth bit into her bottom lip. A habit when weighing out cause and consequences inside her mind.

"Inform the demonarchy that the realm of Hell and Asurim remain allies. That there will be no retribution from our side as long as Leira is given to us when the heir is born. Tell your king that despite my weakness, I did not forsake him today. Do this exactly, and I shall summon the spirit of your Benzosia from among the dead."

"I have your vow on this?" His dark eyes gleamed in triumph.

"Cross my dead little heart."

He straightened, and she noticed that the slight lines of tension which always marked the corners of his eyes had eased ever so slightly.

"Then I'd best be on my way."

She merely nodded when he turned to head for the portal, making his way back to the viper's nest that was the Nessus.

What game are you playing at, Levistus?

86

BENEVOLENCE IS THY NAME

JEZ SAT IN CASS'S THRONE, CRUMPLED AND WRAPPED AROUND HIMSELF. Cass wasn't feeling much better, his brain in a fog. Not accepting.

He'd lost everything.

Jez had spiraled into his own misery, the loss of Dravite finally sinking in. He missed seeing the smile on his Herald's face, hadn't realized how much Jez's high emotions from being with the warlock had been keeping him from sinking himself.

They were linked, each other's emotions felt as strongly as their own. Cass couldn't even hold Jez up through this, he had nothing to hold on to himself.

He paced in front of his throne, serving the multiple purposes of protecting Jez and working off his own frustrations. He couldn't escape. His life had spiraled all the way out of his grasp.

Trapped.

And it was his own stupid fault.

Jez jumped up, Cass missed seeing him until he was knocked off his path, sending him stumbling and grabbing for Jez's arms. They both nearly toppled before sorting themselves.

"Cass. I can feel them." Jez gave him a shake.

The panic and terror flowing through the angel flowed through to Cass.

"Snap out of it. You have the second highest standing in this realm, Jez." Cass shook him back. "There's nothing you should fear."

Nothing left that could be taken away from him.

“In *this* realm.” Jez looked all around, panic increasing. “Can’t you feel it?”

Cass had been so focused on Jez’s panic, he’d missed the vibrations throbbing through his bones.

“They can’t enter my realms.” He let go of Jez, pushing him toward the hall that led to their rooms. “Leave, I’ll take care of this right quick.”

Jez nodded and walked off, his strides long and harried.

Cass perched on the edge of his throne, rested his elbows on his knees and steepled his fingers in front of his face.

And nearly laughed when she stormed in. Angel Barbie was back. The *gall* of her to enter the Hells and upset the balance of all—he shook his head, marveling.

She stopped in front of his throne, braced her feet apart, slamming the tip of her sword between them. There was no flame surrounding it. Holy things did not survive the infernal.

“Demon King,” she said, her teeth bared, and her chin held high. “I’ve come for my brother or your head. I’m feeling benevolent today, so the choice will be yours.”

Cass snickered, got to his feet and laughed harder.

“Since you couldn’t follow through with that threat the last time we met, love, you’ll pardon me if I don’t take you seriously.” He kept walking until he was standing directly in front of her, picked up her elbow and pulled her along.

“My name is not ‘love’. Don’t call me that,” she hissed, hefting her sword up so she could grip it in one hand without it dragging. “Where are you leading me?”

“Well, *love,”* he emphasized the word, a crooked grin tipping up his lips, “unless you want to collapse the very realms, we’ll continue this conversation in my apartment in Normandy.”

“Ziva,” she said with a scowl.

Cass marched her to the portal, turning to take her in again. She wasn’t a sweet chorus singing angel, she was a warrior through and through. There was a scar across her jawbone, her nose had a crooked arch where it had been broken in the past, her gait that of a soldier on the march.

“I don’t know what you mean by that.” He recognized the word as Hebrew but knew very little of the language.

“That’s my name.” She tilted her chin up again, following him through the gate.

His apartment had a fine layer of dust coating everything, a stale smell in the air, and blankets littering the Papasan chair that Verity had set up by his bookshelves.

He opened the drapes and the patio doors, letting in a fresh, sultry breeze and turned back to the bristling Ziva.

“Dear lord my eyes.” She stepped back, looking around. “I don’t know if the bright colors or all the different patterns are more offensive.” Her lips pursed, brows raised as she looked back to him.

He went still, irritation prickling him. He loved this apartment, the antithesis to his rooms in the Nessus where his life was so dark. He had craved color and light, for himself and for *her.* He was surprised to find himself offended; the angel had no right to judge what he had built.

A growl passed his lips, causing both of her brows to rise in amusement.

“This is my home.” He bared his teeth. “Consider yourself privileged to even set eyes upon it.”

“Did you lure me off alone so you can kiss me again?” Her head was tilted, fingers picking at the grip on her sword.

He smiled again. “Is that what you want?”

He closed the distance between them, not trusting himself to touch her. It would be too easy to lose himself in her goodness and light. She was the sun he craved, but it was the moon he desired.

“I want my brother.” She bared her teeth again, her nose wrinkling up in the sweetest sneer. “I can feel his torment. I don’t know what you’re doing to him, but I want him back. I can keep him safe.”

“You have no idea what you speak of,” Cass growled deep in his chest. Some days, Jez was the only thing keeping him from sinking all the way into the abyss.

“I can feel his misery,” she snapped.

“Not of my doing,” Cass said, trying to keep his voice even. Jez hadn’t told him he was still connected to his angelic siblings.

“Have you no compassion?” Her dainty brow furrowed, pain clear in her eyes. Something twanged in his chest at the sight. “He doesn’t belong in your Hells.”

“Compassion?” Cass scoffed. “I am a demon born, little girl. Compassion is a word whispered in the dark. No more than a word.”

She flinched back from him. “Your eyes…”

Yes, his eyes were still reflecting the hell-flames. *The corruption was taking over—*

“Don’t burden me with traits I have no comprehension of.” He leaned in close, scenting the desire that she was fighting. “You want to know what I feel?”

She held her breath, trying to step back from him but her back was against the wall.

“I feel your lust.” He inhaled deep. “I feel you suppressing it, burying it under all your purity. The combination is taunting me.” He leaned in closer. “Enough to madden me...”

He could see her swallow hard, sense her lust spiking. “Let me see my brother. I need to be certain he is sound.”

“Jez’Piel is my Herald. His emotions are my own, my power is his. There is not a being in the Nine Hells that would dare harm him.”

No, they would not dare harm their King, just all that he loved.

Is love just meant to destroy?

“*Perhaps it is. For us.”*

A wave of power throbbed out from her, her skin glowing golden in its wake. “What’ve you done?”

She stepped toward him; her face a mask of horror. “Why would you do such a thing to such a good being? How will he ever be redeemed when you’ve bound him to the Hells so thoroughly? You’ve sullied him beyond __”

Cass pressed his fingers against her mouth. “Stop speaking now. You’re treading dangerously close to insult.”

Her tongue came out, darting across the tips of his fingers, her pupils dilating, her breath hot against him. Irritation quickly switched to craving. He ran a fingertip around the outline of her mouth, soft and plump now that she wasn’t scowling.

Her arm came up, slamming across his, brushing it aside. She licked her lips slowly, as though pondering his taste.

“You think I worry about insulting you? Demon scum,” she spat out, her face inches from his.

“Demon scum who is good enough for your brother to care for,” he snarled right back in her face.

He didn’t need this shit today.

Her breath huffed against his lips. “He cares for you?” She relaxed, easing back from him.

Cass nodded, rubbing his hand across the back of his neck.

“Leave him be,” Cass said, all the fight gone. “He’s trying to find what happiness he can. Your people abandoned him, left him defenseless after stripping away everything he was,” his voice faltered, and he turned away.

He looked down when her hand came to rest on his arm, turning back in shock.

“You sound as though you speak from experience,” she said, her eyebrows pulled together over her bright sapphire eyes.

“Don’t.” He picked up her hand and dropped it away from his arm. “Don’t speak with such familiarity. You don’t know me. You don’t even know your brother anymore.”

Her mouth dropped into a frown, her eyes shining as they shifted from his face. “And to think I was going to let you kiss me before I killed you.” She snorted and shifted her grip on her sword so the end tilted up.

He straightened, his nostrils flaring as irritation shot through him. She was the same as the rest, using him for her own pleasures, sating her own lust. He grabbed up her arm that held the sword, holding it against the wall, then pressed his entire body against hers.

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned kissing me.” He dipped his head closer to hers. Hells but she smelled mouth-watering. “Baby girl, you’re playing with fire. You don’t know how fucking tempting…”

He touched his tongue to her bottom lip, sucking it between his teeth when she gasped. She tasted like honey and dreams.

“I want to corrupt that purity in your soul.” Another soft kiss and swipe of his tongue. Damn, but she was making him hot.

She gasped, her mouth opening to his, her tongue darting out to run across his bottom lip.

This was the last fucking thing he needed. And it was everything he needed.

Hells but he hungered…

He tilted his head, molding their mouths together, groaning when he felt her hand gripping the front of his shirt to pull him closer.

Her tongue swept against his, then back as she grew braver. He was losing control of the situation. So easy to lose himself in her…

What in all the hells was he doing?

He pulled back, pressing soft kisses to her lips, because dammit, he just couldn't help himself.

"Take you so hard, right against this wall. Corrupt you so thoroughly your pretty golden wings turn black." He brushed the backs of his knuckles down the inside of her wing.

She groaned against his mouth. He wanted it all.

He had a child on the way. Nothing left to give.

But damn, he could take.

Another nibble. Nectar with a kick.

Sweetest ambrosia.

He could give in, take it all.

Lose himself until there was nothing left but lust and corruption.

She grabbed his hair hard, yanking him down.

Just like…

Amara.

He groaned and threw off her hands, jumping back.

That did it. What the fuck was he thinking?

He had to wait a moment for his breathing to even out, her sapphire eyes as glazed over as his brain felt.

Snap the fuck out of this.

"Your brother is a much better kisser," he said with a smirk.

Her head jerked back minutely, something like disgust flashing through her eyes—gone in an instant before her expression turned murderous.

Something throbbed inside of him at the sight of it. He was such a raw bundle of emotion right now, it was hard to distinguish what the feeling was.

Far better for this one to stay away from him.

Her hand gripped his throat, fingers digging into his windpipe. He felt the tip of her sword pressing against his gut.

"Kill me, love. Do it." He closed his eyes. "They'll strip your wings and toss you in the pits."

"They'll thank me. For ridding the realms of disgusting filth like you." Her fingers tightened around his windpipe, choking off his air.

Filth. For some reason, he always loathed that word but hearing the angel speak it angered him.

Sordes

"Stay on that self-righteous high horse of yours," he gasped, "you upset the balance and…" Her fingers squeezed cutting off his air entirely. Damn it all, he didn't want to have to hurt her.

"Cut off the head of the snake, another will rise up in its place," she snarled. Her hand eased, his hand grabbed her wrist, pulling it away from his neck.

He leaned in close, more to discomfit her than anything. "You could always have my father return, love. Do you have any clue the atrocities he is capable of?"

Cass rubbed his throat where her nails had dug tiny stinging cuts in.

Her eyes moved over his face, filling with sympathy.

He snarled and stepped away from her. "Don't. You don't look at me with pity. You're the one who should be pitied, forever having to follow the dictates of a higher power, trapped in your own righteous little world." He kept stepping back. She was a dangerous lure.

Her eyes narrowed. "And you're not trapped up there on your throne, all alone?" Her teeth were bared, hand on her sword hilt.

"I assume you can find your own way home?" He said, backing away from her and calling up the portal at the same time. "I'll give Jez'Piel your regards. Don't bother us again."

He stepped through the gate and closed it behind him, letting out a roar of fury.

Jez ran up to him, hands on his shoulders, checking him over for injuries. When he found none, he sighed with relief.

"Your sister," Cass said, jaw grinding, "is an infuriating little witch."

"She came here?" Jez's eyes widened. "Cass I'm sorry. We're all each other had. It was always me, Sid and her."

"She still feels you?" He sighed, resting his forehead on Jez's shoulder. Hells, but they were a combined disaster.

"We're biological siblings, we shared a womb. I suppose we'll always have an attachment." Jez's arm wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him in closer.

"You really do still have ties to the celestial courts then. All the Hells." Cass chuckled softly.

Jez shuddered in a deep breath, burying his own face in Cass's neck. "When you go to see your Priestess can I come along? I… really miss her."

"You miss my Mara?" Cass teased lightly, knowing full well Jez was speaking of Dravite. "I don't think she wants to see me."

"I think she lives for it."

"You didn't see the look on her face when she ran from me." Cass closed his eyes, willing away the memory.

"True, but you never see the look on her face when you turn away from her."

Azadiel cleared his throat as he walked into the room, but neither Cass nor Jez made a move to part.

"Barbatos has sent an envoy," Azadiel said moving in closer. "They're awaiting you in the Hall."

"Envoy? We'll head out there," Cass mumbled. "Coming along?"

Jez snorted. "Whatever it takes to keep my mind off shit for a few moments."

"We're not going to lose another fucking thing," Cass growled.

87

A MATTER OF PUBLIC OPINION

He lay out on the chaise, opening his heavy book and resting it on his chest and tried to get lost in the story. Hiding away in the library because his rooms had become a regular social hall.

Barbatos had sent him a concubine, and lovely though the Erinyes was, he wasn't sure if it was meant as some sly mockery of his falling out with the priestess.

His mind was still reeling, trying to piece things together. She'd left him. Hadn't even given him a chance to explain. It just wasn't like her.

"I thought you'd be in here," Azadiel spoke as he walked into the room and moved to stand fully in front of Cass before pulling a chair around to the left of him.

"Yeah," Cass sighed. "Came to get some privacy." He lay his book on his chest and shot the demon a look.

Az sighed and leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees.

"You can't keep her here, Cass." Azadiel spoke of Leira. "You're sending the wrong message unless your intention is to have all the realms believe she's to be your future consort."

"Fuck no." Cass blew out a breath and ran his hand into his hair. "Is she still going on about that?" His brows drew together, anger and confusion warring.

"You know the warlocks believe that. They were ready to war over it," Az said, turning to focus from the stone around Cass's neck back to the blazing hearth.

Cass watched a log roll and the flames flare up. “Is that what *she* believes?”

Azadiel’s expression was understanding when he turned back. He knew whom Cass spoke of.

“I think she got the point you were a little miffed that the Erinyes wore her ring.”

Cass’s hand trailed down to his pocket, patting it, assuring himself that the ring was still safe within. A memory briefly flared, another object in his pocket he obsessively checked for. A silk ribbon that stretched the length of his palm perfectly from thumb to tip of his pinky finger. He always rubbed it across, from the center out…

“A little.” Cass stared into the flames, willing his memory to surface. “I don’t recall ever feeling rage like that. Do you think I’ll be like him? Will a child even be safe around me?”

“You’re not him Cass.” Az leaned forward to rest his hand on Cass’s shoulder. “I didn’t know how bad it was… how often... I should’ve done more.”

Cass shook his head. “He made sure no one knew the worst of it. No one knew about Bas…”

Azadiel grabbed his hand back and hung his head. “Everyone knew about Basileus. There is no hiding the nature of that beast.”

Cass flinched back, closing his eyes and turning his head, shame heating his cheeks. “I didn’t know better. Didn’t know I was allowed to say no.”

“Do you really think your father would’ve left you untutored? You’re the Prince of Lust, Cassius. If that had gone unchecked…”

He bit his lip, keeping the snappish comment held back.

“So.” Cass took in a deep breath, trying to step back from the depths of the intimacy they were toeing. “Where do I send her? Back to Barbatos?”

“Not unless you intend to give up your rights to the child?”

“No. She’s mine and I’ll keep her here.” He ran his fingers up and down the spine of his book. “I’ll just need help. I need to know that someone is watching out for her and if I ever start to be like him… this is why I never wanted any. I can’t trust myself. I never had a good example.”

Az sucked in a sharp breath and turned his head, staring off blankly into the flames. “Do you think your Herald would leave you alone in this?”

He was right. He had Jez. Who better to keep a demon in line than an angel who was once a warrior?

“I can bring her to my apartment in France.” Cass groaned internally. His sacred space. His hideaway. “Might do her some good to get away from the Nessus.”

“You need her away from *you* Cass. Give yourself some time to get your head together.”

Cass just nodded, his thoughts already gone to what arrangements would need to be made.

88

UNSPOKEN PROMISES

THE MONOTONOUS VOICES OF THE WARLOCK NOBLES DRONED ON, AND ON…

For the last fifty minutes, Amara and her order had been stuck in negotiations, where demands were being made and countered. ‘We do not need the demons’, seemed to be the subtext behind every word they uttered. Proving just how little they knew.

Asurim wasn’t strong enough to be self-sustaining, hadn’t been for centuries. Since ascending the throne and taking her place as High Priestess, she’d worked tirelessly in her effort to replenish what power she could, and it wouldn’t have been possible without the infernal energy which fed their own magick.

Warlocks needed magick, magick required energy, and Asurim no longer possessed any of its own. It had at one point, until it had been depleted, quite possibly leaving the realm’s power source extinguished permanently. In order for Asurim to survive they needed the demons, there was no way around that fact. A fact some of her subjects were hellbent to ignore.

She heard the whispers and murmurs around the temple, knew the word going around, spread by insurrectionists who needed to be dealt with. Among her own people, there were those who felt she didn’t deserve to wear the crown placed upon her head. Some going as far as to declare her allying with a demon king an act of treason to their kind who had until recently been subjugated by the demonarchy.

They didn’t know how different the son was from his father. Cassius had been just and compassionate when it mattered, the sin-eater carried those traits within him still. Asmodeus had failed in that regard, he had sought to turn his son into a copy, instead, the sin-eater surpassed him. She cared for her people, but they were wrong about the demon king, and about her.

Back and forth it went, Oberith was red in the face with the effort of restraining his temper. Ravanna wasn’t holding back, her cutting tongue a valuable asset on days like these. Amara would usually speak up and make her will be known, but not today, somehow she couldn’t dredge up enough energy to care. *How much more could she stand to lose?*

She was paying attention, sort of, but after a while, it grew difficult to keep her heavy eyes open. Her sleep was plagued by nightmares still. The last few nights she’d woken bathed in sweat, her voice raw from screaming. And after cleaning herself up, she had simply been too afraid to go back to sleep. Memories could be beautiful, and they could be devastating. But the ones which haunted her most frequently were the ones capable of destroying her.

It was the acceptance of inevitable defeat within the glowing embers of his eyes. It was the tears streaming down his cheeks. It was his heart-wrenching screams… he died that night, and Amara had died every night since.

Ever since Namtar had come to claim Maleficus, she had dreamed of death, *his* death.

Cassius.

The events of that night kept bleeding into Namtar taking the boy. Maleficus hadn’t understood — but Cassius? He’d been broken.

The voices of the nobles and her Dominae slowly faded into background noise as darkness pulled her in.

She’d been ready to die, accepting the bitter truth she’d die imprisoned, alone and forgotten. Cassius had found her and begged her not to give up. With the promise of a life by his side, she’d grown desperate to live. Convinced that one day they would live out the future he’d described, the details layering and growing richer as the years passed.

A life together, free, no responsibilities and tied solely to one another.

He’d asked for her faith, her trust. She gave him everything. In her eyes, there was nothing he couldn’t do. Cassius had promised to one day

set her free, so she knew that one day she would be.

For him, she would survive Hell. For their future, she would conquer any obstacle placed in their way. Together they would vanquish any who would dare stop them.

"Just you and me..."

He was kissing her fingers through the iron bars, her own arm stretched out as far as she could reach, her fingers twirling around the rogue strand of dark hair curling against his forehead. She desperately wanted to bury her hands in that beautiful hair of his and lazily stroke through its length. One day she'd be able to.

"Tell me again how it'll be out there."

His eyes held hers, the pain they'd reflected from his father's latest punishment dulled. She'd taken his pain, had fed from him until he eased, and groans of agony had become moans of need.

Any time she took from him it left him starved, the pain claiming all his energy while replenishing hers. He taught her how to feed him in turn. He'd promised she would like it—he'd been right. This is how they both survived, how they kept each other from breaking.

Any time they were together, they would ease and comfort the other, sharing pleasure and pain, sharing all they had to offer with the other, dreaming of their future. This is how they became each other's keepers. An unspoken promise, but one Mara would never break.

"We'll run and hide among the mortals, they won't ever find us. You'll sleep in my arms every night."

Suddenly the tip of her finger disappeared inside his mouth, the gentle suck and slick heat doing funny things inside her belly, her lips parting on a gasp when she began to grow achy and wet between her legs.

"You're sure this is normal?"

Her surprise turned to pleasure as she caught the excitement reflected within his ebony depths. "It's wonderfully rare, Mara, it means your body already knows you're mine."

Pride filled her at his words, she was his, would always be his. "And one day, I want to make you mine alone, Cass. When I'm free, I won't let them have you anymore, I'll protect you."

His face scrunched up, the heat of his mouth leaving her, and she knew he was thinking of his special training. Of the acts the concubines and Basileus were forcing upon his body. It had taken some convincing, but

eventually, he told her, shared his shame and grief and she'd cried. Tears his father wouldn't let him shed without harsh punishment, she spilled for him.

Thanks to Cassius, Amara had begun to understand a little about love, about caring for another beyond oneself. In her five by five cell, she had plenty of time to think and had come to the conclusion that what Basileus and the harem demons were doing to Cassius couldn't be love.

Perhaps there were different kinds of it, kinds she didn't understand yet. It seemed wrong, and Cassius said it felt wrong. Then how could it be right? The day would come in which she would rescue Cassius, she would take him away from them. And while hiding together in Gaia she'd make sure no one would ever again touch him against his will. She would cherish him, protect him as if he were her very own treasure.

"You'll become my wife, it can't be anyone else for me."

The sudden declaration yanked her out of her thoughts. She wasn't sure she heard him right. A binding was sacred, it was forever, and he wanted to bind himself to her?

She must've looked as frazzled as she felt and judging by his stricken expression, he'd taken her stunned silence for a rejection.

"You… don't want me? I know it'll be difficult, but…"

A soft sob passed her lips before she could hold it back, her body pressed tightly against the iron bars as she tried to reach for him, needing to feel him.

"I want... I want you, I want to keep you always."

What she wouldn't give at that moment to have her first real kiss from him, to finally know how his lips would feel against hers. Instead, he pressed his thumb against his lips, then reached out beyond the bars to brush his kiss upon hers. She did the same, sharing their own kiss to seal a promise made.

In that instant, a miracle occurred within the heart of Hell itself. For amidst the suffering, misery, and despair, they shared a true moment of happiness.

"I'll never leave you, assat-shi."

"And I'll never let you go, veus meu."

Each word surged through her as they became a sacred vow made in the dark. She felt Cass shiver lightly against her touch, his own breath catching, he'd felt it too.

“You won’t be the first, they took that choice from me, but I am yours, my amata. And when we get out of here, when we’re finally free, you’re going to place your mark on me, and I’m going to devour you slowly until every inch of you bears my mark.”

Her body heated with just a few simple words…dark gods…the way he said them.

He would be her first, her last, her only. And she vowed to erase everything that hellish scum forced upon him. She would reclaim his body, restore his pride and dignity and undo the damage they’d done. He belonged to her now; she belonged to him, and one day she would make right the wrongs that had been done to her Cassius.

Somehow, he must’ve known what she had been thinking, and he smiled at her. His smile was so beautiful it still stole her breath away, even after all this time...

“One day, we’ll have a real family together, and we’ll be sure to love them and not hurt them.”

She looked up in surprise. “You want children?”

His gaze burned her as if he was trying to imprint the image of their future together into her mind.

“Only if they’re with you. I want my children to have your eyes.”

She cursed the iron bars for keeping them apart when all she wanted to do was disappear into his embrace. “Only if they have your smile, my demon.”

He leaned into her touch, and she could feel the need and longing radiate from him, matching her own. “You and I Mara, nothing will ever stop us…”

The comforting darkness was gone too suddenly, leaving her gasping for air as she tried to cling to the memory, not ready to let go just yet. She felt disoriented when her eyes met Dominus Berith’s concerned gaze. The sigil on her palm burned hotly.

“Cass…”

The nobles raged on, oblivious to the turmoil wrecking their regent while Amara forced herself to remain still upon her throne. She focused on her breathing, trying to will away the ache within her chest as her nails dug into the armrests.

Nothing could ever stop us? My Cassius, how very foolish we were…

“Sarratum-sa,” Elmira whispered at her ear, “there’s a situation in the Nessus we’ve been alerted to.”

89

NO LONGER A SANCTUARY

HIS DRAPES WERE STILL OPEN, THE SUN BLAZING INTO HIS LIVING ROOM. A piece of paper was taped ominously in the center of his patio doors, and he abandoned the two Erinyes in the foyer to go see what portends it brought. No one knew about this apartment. It was his sacred space. His magick hidden within the rampant ley-lines, his very essence hidden by the surrounding consecrated ground.

He ripped it off, reading carefully.

Demon scum,

It so eloquently began;

I closed your window for you. Though it wasn't for you so much as for the beautiful Persian throw rug directly in the path of the rain that might have entered. For future reference, I prefer red wine, though the wine in your fridge was lovely with the addition of the grapes in your freezer.

He growled at that. Fucking Angel Barbie, helping herself to his stuff?

In exchange for my rug salvage, you can pass on this note to my brother…

The rest was written in a script only recognizable to him because it decorated so many of his father's grimoires he couldn't read. Enochian script, the celestial language.

He almost crumpled it up, his irritation close to the surface… but for Jez—to possibly see him smile? He folded it neatly and tucked it into an inner pocket of his jacket as he made his way back to his fridge.

Sure enough, his Prosecco was missing. And there wasn't anything for food. She'd left her wineglass in the sink. He didn't know why that irritated him so much.

The concubine Barbatos sent was going to come in handy after all—as a babysitter. Baby-mama sitter…? Enkara stood behind Leira, her hand resting on the smaller Erinyes' shoulder, her expression amused as she took in her surroundings.

She was a fierce looking red-head, whose name literally translated to 'weapon' — he gave a thought as to why an Erinyes would have a Sumerian name but shrugged it off as one of Barbatos's odd quirks.

He was confident in her ability to keep Leira in line, she'd already shown a great amount of fortitude in dealing with her.

This was his private sanctuary. Yes, it was colorful, he loved colors. And patterns and textures. Anything and everything he'd been denied while living in the heart of the Nessus. He never planned on having to house the mother of his child here. Never planned on letting anyone see it, really.

"I don't want to stay here," Leira whined, shrinking back into Enkara.

Cass ignored her, pulling Enkara to the side. He rifled through a cupboard, pulling out his stash of Euros and handing the bills to her.

"You'll need food here." He glanced over to Leira then back. "Healthy stuff. They'll deliver the order, just select what you'd like. Ask her if there's anything, in particular, she'd like." He notched his chin towards Leira and Enkara arched a brow.

He narrowed his eyes then stalked off to his bedroom, now hers for the duration. The bed was still made haphazardly; he had grown up with servants to see to such menial tasks and had never quite managed to learn the proper way.

Books were still scattered across the nightstand and stacked on the floor beside. He hefted them out to the living room and set them in front of his bookshelf, going back for the next load. Ignoring her presence.

She fell into step behind him. "Cassius, please. I had no idea the ring was meant for her."

He growled.

Un-fucking-likely.

"*I'll make you a ring, so all the worlds will know that you're mine.*" His own words floated through his thoughts.

So he had. Drew the design himself, albeit roughly, picked out the stones all with an eye towards what would suit her.

She left him.

Seeing Leira wearing the ring meant for Mara's hand…

Never in his life had he been in the grips of such a rage as she had brought on. The look in Mara's eyes would haunt him for the rest of his days. Because of her. Leira. Claiming benefits that weren't hers by right.

She already carried the child she had no right to.

She grabbed his arm, forcing him to stop and focus on her.

"Don't leave me here." Her eyes were magnified by the tears that threatened to spill over. "I just want to be by your side."

"That," he snapped. "Is not your place. Will never be your place."

For the first time, his hand reached out, fingers pressing against her lower belly, over her womb.

He felt the spark of life and for an entire stretched out breath; he was humbled. In awe. His daughter… he'd created this tiny spark… curious and mischievous… *she'll have your eyes*…

He snatched his hand away, anger blazing a hot trail through his chest. His child was supposed to look like her. His assat… "*you want a family?"*

"You'll stay here and nurture the growth of my child. You're bound to this apartment, I've seen to it you're protected here." He ran his hand through his hair instead of touching her again. "Enkara will be here to see to your needs. My Herald will check in as I see fit."

Her hands went over her belly, still flat, showing no outward signs of the child nestled within.

"But what am I supposed to do?" She stepped closer to him, her hands going to his chest. "When I'm lonely at night and craving your kisses?" Her hands trailed down, resting on the waistband of his pants, her body arching up, lips reaching for his.

He grabbed up her hands and held them to her sides. "No one touches me but her."

Leira scoffed. "She's not yours. She left you."

"She is *mine*," he yelled and Leira jumped back.

“Stop,” he said calmly, placing his hands on her waist, “I’m not going to hurt you.” His thumbs dragged up, from the bottoms of her hip bones, over her belly, resting just under her belly button. “Won’t hurt you. Never hurt you…”

His mind was lost.

She was smiling. It was the most beautiful thing he’d seen in his life.

“*He’s brilliant, isn’t he Aza?” She turned that smile on their tutor.*

Cass was blushing. She was the only one who had the ability to make him feel self-conscious enough to elicit the reaction.

“*Come now, you know you could do this too.” Cass looked down at his hands instead of her face. The infernal hell magicks were growing stronger inside of him, and all he’d done was summon the darkness. All he wanted to learn were things that were going to help them when he finally broke her free.*

He saw her hand slide through the bars, automatically grasping it up. It was such reflex for them, to always move to each other. Magnetized by a force neither understood.

She was his and he was hers. That was the only law either answered to.

With a shake of his head he stepped back, looking away from Leira, she wasn’t who he wanted to see. He slid open his balcony door and stepped out onto the small patio, taking a deep breath of the chilled sea air, absorbing the sacred silence of the island.

He couldn’t stay. He already felt Jez’s emotions tugging at him; he’d just needed her out of his line of sight. Her ability to spark his temper to that degree was worrisome.

He was turning into his father.

Nature abhors a vacuum.

The void inside of him churned, seeking more. Always more.

He needed his Mara. She was the only thing that satiated the hunger in his soul. His hand tightened over the amulet that was settled under his collarbone. It calmed him, reminded him of her, keeping the void at bay.

She was never going to look at him the same again.

He lost himself in the waves crashing against the rock of the island, breaking themselves. Raw unleashed potential broken and wasted, dissipating to nothing, slinking back to rejoin the whole, starting all over. Through sheer persistence, he knew that one day the waves would win. They were slowly eating away at the rock.

He wondered which would break first. The nature of rock immovable, the nature of the tides to continue destroying themselves. All the sea yearned for was a clear path to be free…

"My lord," Enkara's voice broke through his morose thoughts. "I've returned. I've brought back some fresh food if you would care to join us?"

Cass shook his head. Jez's emotions kept tugging at him, he had to return. Leaving the angel in charge when his emotions were in such a volatile state had been a reckless decision on his part.

"I have duties to return to." He turned and placed his hand on Enkara's shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. "See that she has all she needs. There are credit cards in the cupboard, and a laptop with internet in my bedroom."

He kissed Leira's forehead on the way by, ignoring her hands grasping for him and made his way back to the portal.

And came through into the heart of the Nessus, surrounded by chaos.

Jez paced frantically, grabbing Cass's arm and dragging him out of the portal, yelling back at him as they ran.

"Where the fuck have you been? I've been calling for you."

"It didn't feel any different from your emotions over the last while," Cass called back.

They ran all the way back to his bedroom and found Azadiel sitting on the settee, hands buried in his hair.

"What's happened?" Cass dropped in front of him, placing his hand on the demon's arm.

Azadiel looked up, his eyes puffy, lines of strain bracketing his mouth.

"He's gone," Az said, running his hands down his face with a brisk motion. "Levistus has been taken." His eyes met Cass's, full of torment. "I can feel his pain."

90

CARED AT ONE POINT

"I don't know why I even have to learn this, Az." Cass flopped over and lay on the ground, looking up at his exasperated tutor.

His arms were sliced up and bloody, he probably had it in his hair now from laying in the circle, and he was exhausted. Summoning the Hells was not one of his talents.

"I need you to learn how to do this Cass." Az sat beside him, sighing into his hands.

"Will it help me get her out?" Cass asked, throwing his arms over his head and stretching fully. That's all he needed, enough strength to see them freed.

"I need you to do this for me." Az stared off out the window, a haunted expression briefly crossing his features. "I've never asked you for a thing in exchange for all that I teach the two of you, just this. This is something I'll never have the talent for, it's not in my blood."

"But I'm tired," Cass sighed. "I don't think I can do this. Can't you teach me that voice of power thing? I want to learn that."

"Now that, Cass, is not in your *blood." Az smiled down at him. "You're hell-born, and your mother from a different race. That's a Celestial talent that I managed to retain."*

"Because you were terribly strong?" Rumors were that Azadiel had commanded celestial legions in the hundreds of thousands during the first war of the higher planes. That his power was a legendary thing, and that's why even the great Asmodeus gave him a wide berth.

“I was.” Az gave in and stretched out on the hard floor beside him. “Being bound to the Hells stripped me of most of the powers I was best known for.”

“Then why would you settle for being someone’s Herald?” Cass asked cautiously.

Bringing up his overlord was a risk. Some days, it set off Az into a rage and Cass wouldn’t see him for hours after. But then, that was time uninterrupted with her*, since Az hardly left them alone together otherwise. It was silly of Az to worry about them being together physically when there were thick iron bars separating them.*

“Because of my love for Levistus and my unwavering faith in his beliefs.”

Cass blinked his eyes, shaking off the memory.

Azadiel was hurting. Cass had cared about that at one time.

Damn it all, Cass was worried about Levistus himself. His unlikely advisor and… friend. Sometime over the past while he’d grown to respect the ornery demon, even enjoyed his company.

He had eventually learned to summon the Hells, and it had been his father who’d taught him, this was the first he’d remembered the early failed lessons.

It wasn’t the time to dwell on that.

He pulled his sweater over his head and ran down the hall for Levistus’s room.

Azadiel was sitting on the bed, his face buried in his hands, his misery so strong Cass could pick up on it.

“Az?” Cass breathed out as he walked up to the bed.

Azadiel looked up sharply, surprise in every line of his face. Right. He supposed, he hadn’t called him that since… the time he couldn’t remember.

“Our mind-link is weak,” Azadiel said, his shoulders bunched with tension. “I can feel his pain and rage, but he’s not speaking to me. He’s always spoken to me.”

“I can summon him. I did it once.”

Az jumped to his feet. “Yes, try. Please, Cass.”

“In here?” Cass looked around the sparsely furnished room. there was space…

“In here, where his essence will be the strongest.” Az was rolling up Cass’s sleeves as he spoke.

Cass grabbed the dagger that Az hurriedly pressed into his hands, pacing out the circle before slicing his arm to open a vein. He hissed sharply as the metal parted his flesh, the burning pain clarifying his thoughts.

Jez was there, haunting the back of his thoughts, his emotions a throbbing ache. Cass sent him a plea for assistance, his Herald’s strength needed to keep him focused. His mind was an uncertain mess, and this was a tricky cast.

The first time he’d summoned Levistus forth, he had a firm lock on his location. Once he felt Jez’s attention, he began. Letting his blood drip along the perimeter of the large circle, then into a dish Az provided.

He sealed the circle, pulled his sleeve over the still bleeding slice, then moved on to paint Levistus’s sigil in the center. He stepped out of the circle, drawing his unstable power into focus, trying not to prod at the void, and called him.

“Levistus, I summon you.” He threw up his hands and released the summoning magick into the circle, the room echoing the shock wave.

The force of his power doubled when it rebounded, sending Cass flying against the wall.

“Fuck!” Jez yelled as he ran into the room, pinning Azadiel to the wall beside where Cass was slumped on the floor. “What did you do to him? He had nothing to do with Levistus going missing.”

“Stop, Jez.” Cass groaned as he sat up, his back and ribs aching. “That wasn’t him.” He looked up at Azadiel’s defeated expression. “They’ve got him well warded, wherever he is. That’s some powerful magick.”

“Do you think it was the warlocks?” Jez stepped back shaking his head. “I don’t believe she would do that to you.”

“Mara has no love for Levistus.” Cass frowned, looking down at his still bleeding arm. Damn sweater was sticking to the blood—

“Send word to her, Cass,” Az said as he knelt beside him and pressed his hands over the wound. “She wouldn’t remove Levistus from the board. She wouldn’t leave you with nothing, and he’s still essential.”

Cass just nodded. She might do it. She had little patience and Levistus wasn’t known to step lightly.

“I’ll go.” Jez pulled Cass to his feet. “I know she didn’t do this. I think she’ll help if you were to ask.”

Cass shook his head sadly. “You didn’t see the look on her face…”

“Enough feeling sorry for yourself.” Az jumped up, his teeth bared. “Your Mara will help you.” Az pulled at the chain around Cass’s neck, the amulet coming untucked from his collar. “She won’t abandon you in this, she wouldn’t take your advisor from you when you need him still.”

Jez put his hand on Cass’s shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “You want me to bring a message to her?”

Cass took in a deep breath, his thoughts not forming. All he could see was the fear and betrayal in her eyes.

“*Lock her in a five by five cell and throw away the key…*” His own voice floated back up in his mind, Mara’s stricken look the only thing he could see.

“No Jez.” He rubbed his hand over the sigil on his chest. “Ask her if she can scry for him. Don’t tell her… that I thought she would do it. Please.”

All the Hells could he offend her any more?

91

AGAIN WITH THE PUBLIC APPEARANCES

"YOU'RE LATE!"

Agate stood fuming as Jez'Piel made his way through the portal gate, the warlock impatiently grabbing his hand and pulling him the rest of the way through.

"I was expected?"

She nodded fervently. "Of course, slowpoke. Domina Elmira had a vision of you being present for this event, so I was sent to fetch you. Come on, the tournament started twenty minutes ago, and judging by the cheers coming from the arena, we're missing the best part."

He hadn't known her long, but one of the things that defined Agate was her determination. Lord but wasn't that the very reason she'd gotten herself tangled in Lucifer's web? All he could do was give in and allow himself to be dragged along, as the small but feisty female rushed him along through the massive corridors of the temple. Not even time to sightsee.

"Agate, I came here to speak with the Priestess, it's rather urgent."

She nodded but didn't slow her pace, and he was tempted to stop, just to tease. If he did, he knew that she would fluster, and her cheeks would warm and redden. *Just like Dravite's had…*

"She knows already."

A quick tug at their joined hands forced Agate to stumble backward, the momentum ensuring she plowed straight into his chest.

“Ow, you nearly broke my nose, you big oaf!” She tilted her head slightly, her eyes narrowing. “Are you wearing a chrome plate under that shirt?” She spoke with the same frenetic energy she infused into everything she did. The woman was a whirlwind on legs.

“I’m not.” He looked down at her in bewilderment. He was never quite certain what she was going on about.

“Oh.” Her lips parted, her tongue unwittingly brushing along her lips as her eyes traveled down the expanse of his chest. “Well, that hardly seems normal.”

Her fingers again prodded at her pixie shaped nose with an angry swipe, and Jez was left to wonder if Dravite and Agate had some distant Fae lineage. Their sharp yet feminine features fit, and so did their speed and strength. Regret and loss hit him swift at the thought which often plagued him, had he not distracted Dravite with the note he’d hidden for her inside that book of poems, she would’ve noticed Leira’s approach. She would’ve sensed the attack coming, she would be alive.

How can I miss her so deeply when our time together was so brief?

With an agitated breath, he forced himself to focus, there were issues at hand which needed his attention. Then Agate’s words filtered through his mind, and suspicion took hold.

“Agate what exactly did you mean by ‘she knows’?” What if he’d been wrong?

“Shit! If you lot have something to do with the disappearance of Levistus…”

Hazel-green eyes held his captive, her expression turning obstinate as her brow furrowed into a scowl, the result intimidating enough that it could scare off an enemy on the battlefield.

“What? Of course we didn’t take the Demon Prince. For hells’ sake angel, Sarratum-sa wishes him dead, not kept and fed.”

Her eyes sparked, obstinacy shifting to agitation, turning her eyes just a slightly deeper shade of green. Fascinating. And he had to fight back a grin when, as expected, her cheeks began to flush a dark red against her flawless complexion.

He folded his arms over his chest, amused at her struggle not to look in that direction. “Then how is it you know what I came here for?”

“Same way I knew you were coming here in the first place, duh. You do realize you guys aren’t the only ones with access to spies? Just because

Sarratum-sa trusts the Demon King does not mean that courtesy is extended to the rest of the demonarchy."

Shit, he had offended her.

She flung her hair back over her shoulder, the color, he noticed wasn't truly black like Dravite's had been, but a deep crimson.

"Is this why you came here, To accuse my queen of an act that would endanger the treaty? She has done everything within her power to ease the growing tension between the Hells and Asurim." She was getting really riled. He rocked back on his heels, fascinated at her lack of caution, to be yelling in the face of a being as powerful as he… *had been.* "You haven't got the slightest idea of the chaos that ensued after Dravite's ceremony. The realm is in upheaval, our people are furious, there simply wouldn't have been the time in her schedule for a game of demon snatch and grab."

Laughter unexpectedly burst from his chest. "Snatch and grab?"

"Kidnapping sounds crude." She crossed her arms over her chest, and lord save him, he looked. "We're warlocks, not barbarians."

"But… you still kidnap beings?" He cleared his throat and averted his eyes.

"Oh, of course we do, you think living sacrifices volunteer for the position? But we didn't snatch En-Levistus. No one would dare anyway, his connection to Sarrum-sa protects him."

"Don't call him that!" Shock snapped him right back to his senses.

"Why ever not Jez? It's what he is. I know, Dravite knew, and you know it as well. If he's suffering the same as she is, then you must've heard him call out for her. She does… every night"

He pulled Agate flush against his body, brushing a kiss against her forehead as he pressed his finger against her soft lips. With a sense of dread, he scanned their surroundings.

"Gatie, don't speak of this in the open ever again, it's too dangerous."

"It's unfair…" When he looked down at her he noted that her gaze was still filled with anger, yet her eyes were quickly filling with tears. His arms enfolded her, without thought of repercussion.

He understood her sorrow. No matter how cruel and cold Amara's behavior appeared at times, Agate still loved her Queen. And no matter how selfish and destructive Cassius's behavior could be, Jez had come to love him. And they were hurting.

"Yes, it is."

Deafening screams and cheers broke the heavy silence between them, the intense vibrations causing the floors to quake. The walls hummed with power as the onyx stone absorbed the energy which was being unleashed in the arena.

“What the Hells is that?”

“*That* is the alternative to war. After that epic clusterfuck in the Nessus during my sister’s ceremony, the principales and masters from every caste and every dominion descended upon the temple to demand war. Leira and Glasya dishonored Dravite and insulted our Sarratum. Warlock pride isn’t something you step on lightly. They want blood, so that’s what she’s giving them.”

She stepped out of his arms, giving him a quick pat on the chest, her attention drawn towards the battle sounds.

“What you hear is the sound of Tahazu Mitu, the battle of death. A tournament with one sole survivor, the winner is to inherit Dravite’s battalion and take her place as general within the Asurian infantry.”

For a few moments, he could do no more than stare, dumbfounded. “We weren’t made aware it had come this close war.” His fingers raked through his long blond hair, pushing it angrily from his face.

The Nessus already had Glasya to worry about, they couldn’t risk losing Asurim as an ally, and couldn’t afford them as an enemy.

“If Cassius finds out, he’s going to lose it. Fuck! How long will the tournament keep them distracted for?”

Agate had once again taken his hand in hers, her skin was soft, her touch gentle.

“It’s bought us some valuable time, there were a few among the more powerful ranks of the masters and principales who were actively sowing discord against the demonarchy, and against our Sarratum.”

When he didn’t reply, she continued. “I forget sometimes you aren’t fully brushed up on the history. The rulers of Hell haven’t always been kind to our people, for centuries we were no better than servants to their whims. Some, like Leira, still consider us such—filth. So it’s easy to understand why some of our own would rather see Hell be an enemy than an ally.”

Again, she tugged at his hand, urging him to follow along, he relented.

“Angel, a little trust please. *Our* Queen...” She tilted her head in defiance at him. “Would sooner pick up a sword herself than allow Asurim

to go to war against the Hells, not as long as he remains seated upon that throne. All we needed was a little time for our Needlers to weed out the instigators." She then grinned at him and winked. "And dispose of their bodies."

When she finally stopped it was to stand before a wall of heavy black curtains. At Agate's brisk nod, the warriors who stood guard moved the fabric aside to allow them passage to whatever lay beyond.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the transition as they stepped out from the darkness of the corridors and into the purple daylight of Asurim. When his vision cleared, he realized he was standing upon a lofty balcony, its panoramic view highlighting a massive arena, and the bloody battle taking place in its center.

"This is incredible…"

The stands which encircled the arena looked as if they reached all the way up into the silver clouds, each seat filled with spectators who roared and cheered in support of their champion. Floating columns held up banners which proudly waved on the gentle breeze, their colors and crests honoring the battalions which served the Asurian forces. The show of power was astounding.

When he finally managed to tear his gaze away from the spectacle before him, he grew aware of the fact he stood surrounded by the elite of warlock society. All nine of the Dominae were in attendance with their families, and to his surprise so were many master warlocks.

Dravite had begun to teach him about the intricacies of Asurian society, masters were the warlock equivalent of nobility, and nobility, be they demon or warlock, were a notorious pain in the ass to their regents.

"They are rich in influence and power, strategically it's wiser to secure their support rather than lose it," Agate whispered by his ear.

Some of the masters were standing by the balustrade eager to be seen there by the crowd confined within the stands. Prideful beings indeed. Others were watching and commenting on the battles which were taking place within the arena. But most were lounging about on daybeds, happily partaking of the food and libations offered while discussing topics ranging from the weather to magick and politics.

A light squeeze against his fingers had his attention snap back towards Agate, who gave him an encouraging smile. "Come on Angel, she's expecting you and patience isn't one of her stronger virtues."

The roar of the crowd was overwhelming as he approached the small podium placed at the center ledge, certain to provide those who occupied the seats with an unobstructed view of the bloodshed below.

Louder than the roars and cheers was the hush which fell over the crowd when he moved closer, revealing his presence to the spectators. For a brief moment, even the fighting below appeared to come to a halt. He was no warlock, but even he could sense the animosity rising up from the crowd, he could feel thousands of eyes on him, their gazes ripping him to shreds.

“You weren’t kidding about the tension, were you?”

“Nope, not even a little.”

From behind one of the large seats, the soft sound of feminine laughter bubbled up. “Ah, blessed silence. That can only mean that my guest of honor has arrived.”

Over the back of a tall seat, Amara’s head popped up, an impish grin on her lips. “Herald don’t fret, come join me. They may look mean, but I promise you it’s all bark with no bite, I’ve muzzled them myself.”

He was guided to a seat at Amara’s right, a seat which Dravite once told him was reserved for only the highest honored guest, the seat to her left remained unoccupied, the seat of the Sarrum.

She always stays on his right. Dravite and he had once compared notes when discussing security, and he was left to wonder if that was the reason, or if there was more to it. Neither of them were sticklers for protocol, but in this, the Priestess never wavered.

“I do believe the stir caused by your entrance has bested my own.”

The corners of her lips were upturned in a cheeky grin, the cyan color of her eyes sparkling with mischief and something else, something unnatural, and her cheeks were flushed — as if she were touched with fever. He had seen that same gleam in Cassius' eyes many times before. *Poison.*

He gave a quick glance at Agate wondering if she knew, or had someone poisoned her? The sad smile he received in answer confirmed the troublesome suspicion. It was no accident; it seemed that despite appearances, their Queen was faring no better than their King.

“It’s considered rude to out-stage the Sarratum you know. How fortunate for you that I’m no longer a prideful creature, or I would’ve taken offense.”

“Is that so highness? I was certain that your pride could survive such a minor slight.” A cheeky grin creased his face.

“Pride carries an acrid taste when made to swallow, thus I no longer care for it.”

With the exception of the visit with Mephistopheles, he’d only ever seen Amara clothed in the dark robes which symbolized her status of high priestess. Today was different, she was clad in deep purple silks which transformed into a midnight blue shade whenever she moved. Silver chains had been attached, keeping the flimsy material bound together at her breasts and hips, which were encircled by a belt of darkly shimmering crystals. An emerald diadem had been placed against her forehead, accenting the now turquoise coloring of her hair, which had been woven into braids atop her head.

Today she wasn’t the priestess he’d come to know, she was the Sarratum of Asurim. Every inch of her a statement of wealth and power. The change was startling. He well understood the need for the tournament, and to win the favor of the masters, but seeing her like this threw him.

Outwardly Amara appeared everything strong, regal and radiant, but when one bothered to look beyond the façade and the too-easy smile, it was easy to see that she appeared lost and utterly miserable. No wonder Agate had so readily jumped to her defense, their Queen was breaking. Taking a gamble on instinct he leaned in closer as to take her into confidence.

“I am sorry for the news Priestess, for had you been prideful still, I would’ve told you that you’re by far the most beautiful peacock I’ve ever laid eyes upon.”

His gamble was rewarded with a burst of genuine laughter.

“A peacock?” She then looked at her gown in surprise as if suddenly realizing the similarity in colors.

He moved closer still. “Even in dark robes and bared feet, you’re more a queen than Leira could ever be in all her finery. Don’t do this to yourself, you have nothing to prove, not to them, not to Cassius.”

He was surprised when her gloved hand moved to cover his shoulder, her eyes diligently avoiding his. He’d hit the mark.

“Thank you Jez’Piel.”

With a short nod, he eased back into his seat, understanding the part he was asked to play. He could help ease the tension by showing a united

front, a representation of the peace between The Nessus and Asurim.

“Tell me, are you a fan of combat sports?”

“More so when taking part rather than being a spectator.”

Mara’s gaze moved back to the battle, and his followed, just in time to catch a tall female force open a trans-dimensional vortex right above the head of a male warlock twice her size, who was busily conjuring up what looked to be a hell beast.

“She miscalculated where the vortex would open.” He stared in horror at the female who was about to be ripped apart by the feral beast as soon as it was released from the summoning circle.

“Or did she?” Amara inched closer to the edge of her seat, her brows raised with interest. His own gaze followed.

Before the male warlock had time to shatter the circle which imprisoned the summoned hell-beast, the female released her hold and the vortex snapped shut, effectively severing his head.

“And somewhere across time and space, a decapitated head just appeared out of thin air…”

The crowd exploded into cheers and war cries when the man’s headless body collapsed upon the red sand of the arena, staining the field with his blood.

“Are you very sure En-Levistus could not stay lost?”

Jez’s grin widened at the brazen question. “You know very well Cassius wants his advisor back, alive preferably.”

“And you came here to search my dungeons?”

Jez’s grin turned rueful, recalling with a heavy sense of shame she had, in fact, been the original suspect. His hand came up to rub the back of his neck, certain he could feel Agate’s angry glare burning a hole into the back of his head from the seat beside him.

“I came to ask for your assistance in locating him.”

She didn’t answer, instead, her attention remained upon the arena, where only three warriors remained standing among the large number of bodies of those slain in battle.

“The female warrior is named Andromeda, she was a protégé of General Dravite herself until promoted to second in command in the legionnaire battalion.”

Agate’s small hand moved into his, and he gave it a light squeeze. He admired Andromeda’s tactics as she battled, the warrior making the most

out of both skill and ingenuity. The knowledge that it'd been his Dravite who had honed those skills filled his chest with pride, and he could clearly see the same emotion reflected in Agate's eyes. In that instant, he was no longer an impartial spectator to the tournament.

"What are her odds?"

Amara's slender shoulders came up in a shrug. "Hard to tell, no one believed her capable of surviving beyond the fourth round, yet here we are."

All eyes moved to the center of the arena as a strong pulse of magick rippled through the air. The two warriors appeared to have joined forces against Andromeda, imprisoning her within her own protection circle as she was forced to shield herself against a blast of green fire.

"That's Hexafire," Agate shouted in his ear over the roar of the crowd.

"The same fire used to burn innocent men and women who had stood accused of witchcraft, their despair caused their souls to merge with the flames. A powerful summons. As soon as the flame makes even the barest contact with a victim, its fire will spread. First, it burns away only the outer flesh, leaving the muscles intact. When all skin and hair is burned away the flames latch onto muscle and sinew. The flames cannot be doused, and the cycle repeats itself until there's nothing left of the victim but a pile of ash."

Of the two warlocks who banded together, one was controlling the Hexafire, while the other appeared to be conjuring a spell. Suddenly, the corpses of the fallen warriors littering the arena began to rise, then walk, The horde of undead walked straight through the flames of Hexafire as they slammed their burning bodies against into Andromeda's protection barrier in an attempt to breach it. They succeeded when Andromeda appeared to lose footing, breaking her focus, and shattering her circle.

"Shit!" Agate hung over the balustrade to see, Jez quickly grabbing her waist to steady her as he himself moved to the edge of his seat. Andromeda couldn't be seen, and he could only hope she'd managed to escape the undead, or worse, the Hexafire.

The two remaining warriors wasted no time turning on each other as hell beasts rose from the ground to attack the undead. As soon as they attacked, the beasts began to howl in agony, the hexafire an impartial force as it ate away at the skin and fur. Yet even as the fire consumed them, the

beasts continued their attack. Not because they chose to do so, worse, they were under the complete control of the warlock who had summoned them.

“You allow this? That’s too cruel.”

“Power is cruel Jez, because it corrupts. It would be an injustice to hide that fact, we must all learn from it. Either that lesson is taught by observing warriors in the arena, or it’s learned the hard way in life.”

He wanted to ask Amara what she meant but just then caught sight of Andromeda stepping out of a portal rift, coming up directly behind one of the warlocks, her sword severing his head before he even realized she was there. The crowd went wild.

Before it could even drop onto the sand, Andromeda grabbed the severed head of the warlock while dodging the barrage of burning undead and hell beasts. With a swift move, she let the hexafire latch onto light the former warlock’s scalp, his hair instantly going up in green flames.

“She wouldn’t….”

“Oh, but I do believe she is…”

With precise accuracy, the severed head was hurled in the direction of her final opponent, who had been too distracted by the loss of control over his hell-beasts to realize what was coming at him at such high speed. Instinct had him snatching the head as soon as it approached, and as he screamed, the Hexafire latched on.

The arena exploded in a thunder of applause and cheers. And Jez was forced to again reach for Agate lest she topple over the ledge in her cheering. The next instant her arms were around his neck, and he found himself wrapped in her tight embrace while they watched their champion drop to her knee while facing the balcony. The tournament declaring its victor by raising Dravite’s own banner alongside Andromeda’s.

After a few moments Amara rose from her seat and with her so did every man, woman, and child present within the arena. A hush fell over the crowd when she raised her hand, gesturing for Andromeda to approach.

“Warrior, state your business.”

“I, Andromeda, second commander to the legionnaire battalion, claim victory in honor of General Dravite and request the honor of taking her place in service to Asurim and Sarratum-sa.”

Cheers erupted from the stands, quieting only when Amara lifted her hand to command their silence. It was then that Jez noted that her hand was trembling ever so lightly.

“Agate…?”

Her eyes followed his, growing sad. “She must have ingested too much, the poison is turning on her.”

“Andromeda, daughter of Asurim. Your claim does you credit and your request has been honored. Rise now, General Andromeda, and take your place as the sword of Asurim and shield to the Sarrae.”

Cannon blasts boomed when she finished speaking, filling the purple sky with breathtaking fireworks display high above them before raining down upon the arena in radiant shimmers of green, gold and black, the colors of Asurim. Warriors rushed the sand, filling the battlefield to either collect their fallen or to join Andromeda in her moment of victory, her own battalion already surrounding her. Tonight, there would be no talk of war, instead, all nine dominions of Asurim would celebrate the legacy of Dravite, and the rise of Andromeda.

Jez caught Amara as she swayed on her feet, Agate quickly coming to her side to steady her.

“Oh yeah, one more thing...”

He caught her looking toward Oberith, who quickly came to join them, his arm linked with a Domina who Jez had yet to meet.

Amara smiled as the pair reached them. “Dominus Berith you of course already know, but I would like to introduce you to Domina Elmira. She is Asurim’s oracle, and among the most powerful soothsayers in all the realms.”

Domina Elmira was a beauty, her sharp features and glowing bronze skin reminiscent of the ancient goddesses of the Mesopotamian era. A stark contrast of Dominus Berith, who, with his long white hair and luminescent skin never failed to claim the attention of the demonesses within the Nessus any time he accompanied Amara.

“Dominus Berith, what news do you bring me?”

“The Needlers have all reported back, Sarratum, no marks were missed.”

“See angel, I told you to have a little faith,” Agate murmured mulishly from somewhere behind his back.

Amara had already turned her attention back to her Domina. “Elmira, as you’re aware, the Demon King seems to have ‘misplaced’ his advisor. Be a dear and locate him.”

Requiring no further information, Elmira smiled, gave a deep bow, then made her departure immediately after.

“Once Domina Elmira has located him, I’ll have Agate bring you word of his location. There are not many others I can trust with such information. Herald, I implore you to keep her safe while she is there.”

“Gatie, once you step out of the portal, you move and you don’t stop until you’ve reached either Cassius or me. Don’t speak to anyone else.” He turned to Amara, realizing what it must cost the Priestess to once again order one of her own into the Nessus. “And come armed... The Nessus is not a safe place. I suspect it never truly was.”

Agate gave a curt nod, then a small bow in Amara’s direction, “Understood.”

His arm shot out, steadying the priestess when he felt her buckle beneath her own weight, then inched close so his words would be only for her to hear. “Come back with me, at least until the poison’s worn off. You know Cassius will protect you.”

She didn’t look up. “I know this Jez, but then who will protect him from me?”

“He needs you.”

“Jez, where I go, death follows.”

“He believes you to be afraid of him, are you?”

That made her head snap up, her feverish eyes locking with his own. “Levistus never gave him my message?”

“Priestess, Levistus never made it back to the Nessus.”

Had he still held any suspicion of her involvement in the disappearance of Levistus, it would’ve been obliterated by the devastation he saw reflected in her expression.

“I didn’t run, I… didn’t.” Devastation turned to desperation before his eyes. “I can’t come with you.”

His hold eased, but he didn’t withdraw. “I understand. Tell me what message should I give Cassius from you? I vow he’ll receive it this time.”

Silk gloved fingers brushed along his cheeks, surprising him when they splayed possessively through his hair. As if enthralled by a spell, he bent to her.

His arm steadied her when Amara rose to stand upon the tips of her toes, lowering his head to hers so to whisper her message into his ear. Instead, her lips pressed against his own.

His mind blanked, and he could do nothing but welcome her caress as she seared his mind and body with a kiss. When he was nearly out of breath, he felt the bite of her teeth as they sank into the swell of his bottom lip, a moan escaping him as she gently sucked away the sting before slowly breaking away. Then with a satisfied nod, she licked her lips and stepped back.

“I do think you may need to deliver my message in private, Herald. You know how fond the demonarchy is of gossip.”

Jez could only stare at her as Amara turned, then proceeded to unsteadily march for the black curtains. After a few moments, he finally took a breath, his fingers trailing lightly over his swollen lips.

“Fuck... I think Cassius is going to kill me.”

At the sound of laughter, he turned, then felt his own cheeks burn at the sight of Agate, amusement bright within her green eyes.

“That’s one hell of a message to pass on, angel.”

He nodded in agreement before looking back in the direction the priestess had disappeared, then pulling Agate close as to embrace her, pulling her close so only she could hear him.

“Go look after *our* Sarratum, Gatie.”

When he looked down at her, he was rewarded with a dazzling smile. And before he could say anything else, she moved to pressed a chaste kiss upon his overheated cheek.

“Safe travel home, angel, and take good care of our Sarrum.”

92

PROPHECIES AND TWADDLE

HIS FINGERS STROKED DOWN THE PAGE, THE SOFT PARCHMENT COMFORTING, the text flooding his mind with memories.

"Mara taught me Sumerian," he said softly, causing Azadiel to look up from his own tome in surprise.

"Funny, because now I have clear memory of speaking with her using only that tongue when we were children." He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. "It makes no sense. While she was recovering from her time in the Malsheem, I spent hours down there with her, learning a language I clearly must've known before."

Azadiel's mouth flattened. "Your mother is Sumerian."

Cass nearly choked on his next breath, he hadn't known... or had he?

"Then how?" He sat back in his chair, blowing out an exasperated breath. "Why would I forget that?"

Az shook his head sadly. "I came back too late. After the two of you were captured, I'm afraid I gave into my own temper. That was the first time I fought against Levistus. I was told your father locked you in chains — I thought that was the worst of it. It was only after searching for Amara and finding her…" His lips thinned, his expression haunted. "It should never have happened. None of it."

Cass leaned forward, his gut churning. "What happened, Az? Everything else keeps floating up and coming to an abrupt halt there like my mind is balking."

Az nodded. "I hope you don't remember."

Cass growled, “do you know the torment it is for your mind to be fighting itself? How can you say that? I *need* to remember. I need to be *whole*.” He slammed his hand on his desk hard enough to make the weighty tome jump.

“Your father…” Az cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably, “took every memory you had of her. No one realized,” his eyes shifted, and Cass’s narrowed, “how much the two of you were intertwined. I don’t think he knew what the repercussions would be. At least, I like to think he hadn’t known. The actions of a madman are beyond even my comprehension”

“Why?” Cass whispered, the torment felt all the way to his soul leaking out in one uttered word. He dropped his head to his desk.

“Prophecies and foretellings.” Az shook his head, anger glinting dangerously in his eyes.

“Garbage and twaddle,” Cass hissed back.

“You two were supposed to be his weapon, but I think eventually even he grew to fear the prophecies.”

“I don’t understand how any of this fits together.” He went back to reading, moving his marker down the page as he tried to piece everything together.

Levistus said Asmodeus had killed his own consort. But from what he was reading, that was the crime Levistus himself had been sentenced to the Stygia for. There were also footnotes about him being involved with Glasya, though Cass had seen them together and discounted that theory entirely. The history books had been tampered with, this much he was certain of.

Benzosia. That was the name of his father’s consort. Also, the name Levistus had called Amara before. Was he maddened from spending centuries in the ice? Most didn’t last even last a single century buried alive beneath it.

“Did my father kill his own consort?” Cass tapped the book, looking up when Az didn’t immediately answer.

“Do not ever mention these events in Levistus’s presence.” Az dropped into the chair across from Cass, exhaling loudly. “Benzosia was too clever, and it didn’t take long before she became a threat to your father’s rule. Her preference for Levistus—as well as Levistus’s not-so-subtle plotting against your father, added up to trouble.”

Cass narrowed his eyes. “Did. He. Kill. Her.” He was tired of all the dancing around.

Azadiel leaned forward. “Yes.” His hands clenched over the armrests. “Do you honestly think if Levistus had killed the Queen of all the Hells he would’ve just been sentenced to be frozen in the Stygia?”

Cass leaned forward too. “Do you honestly believe that death wouldn’t have been preferable to that?” Az flinched back. “My father is cunning and ruthless. Death would be too easy for such a trespass.”

Azadiel shook his head. “Sometimes it frightens me how much you think like him.”

“Levistus says I think like you.” Cass dropped his gaze back to the pages of his book.

“Cass.” Azadiel’s voice was sad. “Part of me wishes you remembered. What I was to you — Asmodeus may be your sire, but he was never a father to you. His only interest where you were concerned was to train you and eventually utilize you as a weapon to his own end.”

“So tell me.” Anger simmered in his chest, so much a part of him at this point, he’d forgotten what it felt like to breathe without it driving him. “Just tell me Az. I’m fed up with remembering bits and pieces. Do you realize that it’s driving me to insanity?”

Az shook his head “Don’t use that term lightly, Cassius.”

“Is it not the very definition of insanity? I can’t reconcile my memory with my reality—to the point where I don’t know what’s real any longer. I can’t place anything I remember on a timeline, because I remember every fucking minute of my entire one hundred- and forty-years worth of beatings and torment!” He jumped to his feet and slammed his book closed.

Azadiel shrank back into his chair, turning his head from Cass.

“I don’t want to be the one to tell you this.” Azadiel studied his hands.

“Please,” Cass said, sitting back down and burying his head in his hands.

Azadiel looked up at him, his expression devastated, but he remained silent.

“Did you know Levistus dosed Mara with a sleeping potion?” Cass said, changing the subject. If it was that difficult for Az to bring up, he probably didn’t want to know.

Az snorted softly, his lips curling up. “He did?” Cass nodded. “Surprised she didn’t decorate her rooms with his entrails.”

Cass smiled at that. “Seems he got out before she had the chance.”

Jez burst into the room, smelling strongly of incense and dark magick, jasmine and bergamot with a hint of oranges and the coppery tang of blood. He smelled like her rooms. Dark gods, but his craving for her was a physical ache.

“She’s got Elmira scrying for him. I told you she wouldn’t leave you without him,” Jez said hurriedly as he rushed over to the desk, planting himself on the edge.

Both Azadiel and Cass let out pent-up breaths, the edge of urgency that had been driving them easing with that slight glimmer of hope. He knew Domina Elmira to be as gifted as she was tenacious, she would find Levistus.

“She, ah, sent a message for you,” Jez said, avoiding Cass’s eyes, looking down at his hands, over to the wall of books, pretty much anywhere else.

Cass stilled completely, a surge of excitement pumping hotly through his blood. By all the Hells, he yearned… he missed her.

“Are you going to tell me?” Cass said after a moment of silence dragged by.

Jez cleared his throat and Cass jumped to his feet, setting his book aside.

“What is it then?” Cass growled out. “Don’t leave me in suspense. Does she need me? Is she in danger?” He rubbed at his chest, over her sigil, but it was eased, he sensed no strife.

“Tell me!” He grabbed Jez’s shoulders, giving him a rough shake.

With a snarl, Jez grabbed Cass’s face, his fingers digging into his hair and roughly slammed his mouth to Cass’s. He still tasted like her. With a growl, Cass grabbed him back, clenching his shirtfront into his fists and hauling him closer, his tongue probing Jez’s mouth, searching for even a hint of her.

In the background, he could hear Azadiel choke as though he were dying. Jez pulled back with a final tug on Cass’s bottom lip, their eye contact holding briefly before they both turned to see if Az was going to make it.

He’d spit his tea all over Cass’s desk.

Cass jumped to grab his books, glaring at Az, who glared back.

"Said all that did she?" Az finally managed to speak, shaking his head and wiping up his mess with a square of fabric.

Jez smirked, running his thumb and forefinger down the corners of his mouth. "Well, with her own flourish, of course."

Az nodded. "Would expect nothing less."

Neither of them looked back to Cass, so he just slumped into his chair and set his book on his lap to cover the… new developments.

93

PROPER ANNIHILATION

"YEAH, I'M WORRIED ABOUT HIM," CASS SAID, ROLLING OVER TO FACE JEZ. "More about the implications. To take Levistus right from under our noses, and from my realm? It had to be my sister or one of her allies."

"So why don't you move on her?" Jez fluffed his pillow under his head and stretched out his inky black wing. "She must expect retaliation?"

Cass sighed, running his hand into his hair. "I can't declare war with no proof. I need to know his exact location. She could've had Beelzebul or one of the others take him into hiding."

Jez nodded, silent as he climbed out of bed, setting the book he'd been reading on the nightstand. Cass eyed the spine before Jez could covertly hide the title. One of his father's ancient grimoires, the ones written in the Celestial's Enochian language.

"Hells and I forgot you'd be able to read those," Cass said, excitement thrumming through him.

Amara and he both tried to learn the language, both failing. Each time they'd made some headway, it slipped from their minds, as though they were unlearning the language as fast as they could learn it.

"And I see why you shouldn't." Jez gave him a wary look. "These spells are… just awful."

"Well yes," Cass said with a small frown. "Demons, remember? We sow discord and negativity? Sounding familiar?"

"No, this is like rearranging the very fabric of reality stuff. How did your father get his hands on these?"

“I believe he was around for the creation of some of that reality,” Cass said, staring off blankly.

“Do you know what Ziva meant about a Sword and an unholy union being sanctified? Was she talking about you and Amara?” Jez pulled his sister’s letter out from between the pages of the book.

Cass’s whole body flinched. “What right does she have?”

“The Celestial Triad is involved.”

“In keeping Mara and I apart?” Just now or had always been? The old gods, now the Celestials… just how many obstacles would they have to overcome?

“Appears that way.” Jez nodded, his mouth a grim line. “You have no idea what they’re capable of.”

Cass felt the shift of a portal opening and jumped out of bed. Mara…

He tried not to let his disappointment show when it was Agate instead who walked through. Jez got to his feet, smiling widely.

“What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” Jez asked her, his eyes lit up with mischief.

“Oh, I just couldn’t stay away,” she responded breathlessly with a feigned southern accent.

Cass just stood there, confused at the by-play between the two. He noted the warlock was in full armor and had a large sword strapped to her side and leg. She’d come to battle?

“We’ve located your advisor.” Agate moved around Jez to stand in front of Cass. “He’s in the Malbolge, bound by some incredibly strong magick.”

Cass was already moving to the door to call his guards.

“Cassius,” Agate called to him, “if your sister took him, she’s not working alone.”

Cass waved her concerns off and called to his guards.

“Bring me my armor and send for Azadiel. Call the Legions to order,” he was shouting, his personal guards jumping to acquiesce.

“Jez, I need you to stay here and guard the Nessus.” He spoke as he stripped off his pajama pants, pulling on leather pants that fit under the heavy chain mail, and a light shirt that would be comfortable under the chest plates. “In case this is a diversion tactic. I’ll leave you with the Pit Fiends, should be adequate in defense.”

“Couldn’t have changed in the bathroom?” Jez grumbled.

Cass looked over, confused, only to meet the blushing face of the warlock.

“Wasn’t thinking Agate,” he said, fighting his own blush. He’d never cared about his nakedness before—but he didn’t need all of Mara’s people knowing what he looked like unclothed. It now mattered how they perceived him because they mattered to Amara. Likely more than she herself was willing to admit.

One of his guards rushed in with arms full of black armor, helping him fasten it all on. He settled his war-helm over his head, the large forged horns tipped with obsidian and deadly sharp as they curled back from his temples, coming to a point at his jaw.

He turned to Agate and Jez, who were both looking at him as though he were a stranger.

“Assure Mara that I’ll obliterate my sister. I have seventy-two legions under my command and the hell-flames at my fingertips. I will raze her back into the dust.”

“You can’t kill her, Cass. Don’t give your father the advantage he seeks,” Azadiel spoke as he rushed into the room, in full armor himself.

“Fine.” Cass smiled coldly. “But I will put an end to everything she holds dear and strip her down to nothing,” he snarled, the anger rioting through him reaching an unreasonable level.

Agate delicately cleared her throat. “I’ll let Sarratum-sa know.” She looked to Jez, grabbing up his hand. “And if anything goes wrong, you’ll come to us. Vow it.”

Jez nodded. “I vow it.” Then he turned to look Cass over, concern sharpening his features.

“I’d rather be joining you on the battlefield, but I can hold down the home front,” Jez said with a nod.

Cassius strapped his infernal blade to his belt, carefully ensconcing it in the protective sheath of gargoyle skin, the only material able to withstand the wickedly sharp obsidian edges.

His rage was focused with deadly intent. There was no tempering it today.

“To war, Azadiel.” Cass led the way out of his rooms and down to the pits where his legions awaited battle.

Annihilation that’ll go down in the archives of all the Nine Hells. A moment in history which will be passed along in hushed tones through

generations to come, serving as a cautionary tale should your wrath ever again be invoked.

Levistus's own words echoed through his mind. Today would be a tribute to that sentiment. A razing of his enemy so complete they would fear to speak her name.

He marched up the center between the lines of soldiers. Seventy-two legions standing in formation, waiting to be unleashed on the Malbolge. Hundreds of years had passed since the Hells last saw war.

He approached, standing in front of Azadiel and his general, a hulking beast of a male.

"Glasya stays alive," he yelled out to the legionnaires leading each regiment. "I want her sitting on her throne at the end of this day, surveying the destruction and loss, with the knowledge that it was caused by her own design. No quarter! Leave no man standing."

He turned back to Az. "You're the best chance we have of locating Levistus. That's your focus."

"Cass." Az put his hand on Cass's shoulder. "Don't kill her. No matter her taunts and how tempting. We can't fight your father. Not yet."

The time is not right, have patience

The words irritated, dredging up memories and meaning he could not yet place. Cass's expression froze.

"I don't know about that anymore, Az."

Even now, the void inside of him churned, singing a siren song of unfulfilled power. The never-ending abyss he kept shying away from…

"Keep your head about you," Az said, giving his shoulder a squeeze before dropping his hand and falling back into formation.

Cass opened himself to it, tugging at the void, shaping it without diving into it. All the magick of the Hells feeding into him, he was merely a conduit.

He spread his arms, and with a bellow of rage, tore open the fabric between the planes, ripping open a hell-gate that stretched across a mile, straight into the beating heart of the Malbolge.

The land here lived, made from the corpse of a would-be god. It was Glasya's triumph that she had subjugated the land and lay waste to her predecessor's vassals. She was, after all, the daughter of Asmodeus and by all rights should've been his heir as she'd been born of his true consort.

Unfortunately for her, Cassius had come along, born strong enough to channel all the power of the Hells. He hadn't asked for any of it, yet she had made him an enemy all the same.

Today, she'd pay for her arrogance.

He charged through, leading the front-line battalions, directly into conflict. She'd been anticipating his arrival.

He swung his sword, lost to an unthinking rage, hacking, and slicing, pausing only to direct the charge. He sent four legions circling the rear of the fortress, flanked by a dozen on each side, he led the bulk of the army right through to the gates, cutting a swathe through any who stood in their way.

He'd lost sight of Az. Hell, he'd lost sight of anything but the blinding fury that drove him forward. She dared take what was his. Under his protection. No longer was he a young boy incapable of protecting those in his charge.

"I promise you, assat. I'll keep you safe."

He roared again, the blood-curdling rage that surfaced with that memory tearing through him, his wings propelling from his back with enough force to cause a shock-wave, knocking those closest to him to the ground.

The blade of his sword flared, the obsidian channeling some spark of his magick, blue flames licking along the edges, turning the black to an iridescent gleam.

With the next swing he took not only took the pit fiend's head but melted him into a pool of liquid flame.

They were running from him now.

He obligingly chased them down, bursts of hell-flames shooting up in his wake, the ground beneath him trembling and cracking to give way to the molten lava.

"Back to the gates," he yelled to his own legions within earshot.

Couldn't be killing off his own foot soldiers.

The gates of the fortress didn't stand long. They lit up to orange, radiating heat, visibly vibrating before blasting into shrapnel. He quickly threw his arms up, reflexively protecting his face.

It burned through the leather parts of his armor, sharp little pains all over, clearing some of the cloud of rage from his mind. He shook it off, brushing the liquefied metal from his skin as he ran for the doors.

He took a moment on the front steps to look back. Smoke billowed, absolute destruction lay waste to the land, bodies piled everywhere, lava flowing and pooling in low-lying areas.

His own legions were pouring back through the gates, some finishing off the downed soldiers as they went, retreating slowly, telling Cass that there was no battle left out there.

What lay ahead, he could handle on his own.

He threw open the large double wide doors, walking in with a cock-sure swagger learned at his father's knee. Perhaps arrogance ran in the family.

Guards rushed him from either side, weapons drawn, and before they could engage, Cass pulled in parts of their essence, the void inside of him demanding its due. Destruction. Corruption. *Burn the world to ash.*

His hands rose, one with a sword, one pulling up power. Like a conductor of an orchestra, he called up the hell-flames and directed them down his blade. Exploding bits of pit fiends rained down, the guards cringing and flinching back, one even falling to his knees and heaving up his insides.

The darkness inside of him crept through his synapses, consuming all rational thought. His blade swung, his magick consumed. The sigil on his chest burned… the amulet that was nestled in the dip between his collarbones warmed. He felt it absorbing the excess, balancing the ferocious need inside of him.

He took in a shuddering breath, brushed some of the gore from his face and arms and stalked toward her throne room. The stately halls looked barren and abandoned as he made his way through. His sister wouldn't live in such dilapidation, more likely her court had plundered anything of value before fleeing.

Azadiel and his General stood in the center of the throne room holding an unconscious Levistus propped between them, while surrounded by the elite guard. Neither could draw weapons, but Azadiel's free hand circled and one guard was sucked through a portal. Then another.

By the time Cass made his way across the room to them, Glasya had come out of wherever the bitch had been cowering away.

"Have you come to kill me?" Her chin rose. "My sacrifice will not go unrewarded. My death shall be noble and our father will surely avenge my demise," she yelled with rage.

“Not today, dear sister.” Cass strode forward, his sword firmly grasped.

“Cass!” Azadiel’s tone was full of warning.

He had this. He wasn’t going to do anything foolish. This time. But all the fucking Hells he was tempted.

“No, you’ll survive today. You’ll sit on your throne and survey your land of waste and your denizens of corpses.” He grasped her face in his hand. “So that the next time you think to cross me you’ll be secure in the knowledge that no army will back you. Your land will never be reclaimed. Even as we speak, they are being folded back into the fabric of the hells.”

He pushed her back until she stumbled into her throne, feeding off her empty pride and filthy lust. Even now, her twisted mind had gone there.

“Enjoy your rule, Princess of Waste.”

He backed up a step and nodded to Azadiel, who pulled up a hell-gate.

They stepped through, breathing a collective sigh of relief as Levistus dropped to a heap on the floor at their feet.

94

THE ONLY THING LACKING WAS RESTRAINT

He opened a gate right into Mara's bedroom. He hadn't showered, hadn't done more than ripped off his armor and cleaned off his sword. He was sweaty, bloody and… ravenous.

Adrenaline pumped hotly through his veins, his erection hadn't waned, every nerve ending on fire.

She sat at her desk, a stack of documents laid out before her, drink in hand. His discomfort growing at the sight of the loosely bound silken robes covering her. The room grew silent except for the snapping of burning wood within the hearth, her words trailing off when she finally met his eyes. This gave her Dominus cause to turn around and see what it was that snared her attention.

"Leave," Cass growled to Berith, who flinched back a step before straightening tall to glare back at him. He didn't care for the man, and the feeling was mutual.

Mara leaned forward, placing her hand on her Dominus' shoulder, her eyes never straying from him. He could see her pupils widen, her eyes darkening. She burned just as much as he did.

He bit down, his jaw clenching, for it was he could do to stop himself from physically tossing Berith out of her chambers. The arrogant ass shouldn't have that kind of access to her anyway, he mused, searching for just cause to give in to impulse.

Instead, he nodded to Mara and headed for the doors leading to her private bathing chambers. With her eccentric habits, he knew she kept a

bath drawn, and its water heated. She had the nicest smelling soap…

After fully submerging into the welcoming water a few times he washed quickly, groaning each time his hands brushed against his erection. Being surrounded by her scent only further spurred on the need for release, it effectively obliterated every other thought from his brain. Hells he needed. Giving in his hand closed around his rigid flesh giving a couple of rough strokes, his breaths already coming in short bursts. Had to stop…

She was getting all of this.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and stalked back into her bedroom, uncaring that water still ran in rivulets from his hair down his back to spill on the dark stone. His focus intent on one thing and one thing only.

She jumped to her feet at the sight of him; her face flushing, her hands coming together as though she were unsure of where else to put them. Oh, but he would give her a place.

He quickly ensured the room was empty, the doors all closed, the luscious furs on her bed straight and neat, just waiting to be mussed. Like her hair was.

He didn't hesitate, his fingers delved into her hair, distantly noting the hairpins dropping to the floor as his lips met hers.

Her soft hands curled around his neck as her tongue swept out to meet his, her back arching to press her body closer. His hands trailed down to her hips, and he pulled her in tight as he walked her back to the bed, his lips never leaving hers.

They clung to each other, devouring. Never getting enough. Their teeth bumped, his scraping along her lip as he dragged it into his mouth, suckling softly before pressing his tongue to hers again. Their fumbling like that of beginners. That thought only excited him more, he would teach her.

They reached the bed, and his hands moved up to tug at her robes, the slide of silk comparable to the softness of her skin.

"I'm going to make you come so fucking hard you'll be screaming my name for all of them to hear." He kissed her with soft open mouth kisses between his words, their hot breaths panting against each other's mouths. "So everyone will know who you belong to."

His hands finally got her robes parted and found her breasts.

"Cass," she groaned softly as her head fell back. "Yes. Do it."

“Mmpf,” he groaned against her mouth, moving to her neck to place sucking kisses all the way up to her ear.

“I destroyed the Malbolge,” he whispered in her ear as his hips ground against hers. “Left her sitting on her throne surrounded by corpses.”

He groaned roughly as her leg came up to hook around his waist.

“Demon you have the best pillow talk,” she spoke huskily, with a sleepy smile.

“I’m going to take you now. You’re going to come against my tongue.” He broke off as her hands dug into his hair, nudging him down.

He smiled to himself as he lay her down on the furs, tossing off his towel before climbing over her. He slid her robes down her arms, baring her to him completely.

He took a moment just to absorb, his body driven into a frenzy, his mind wanting to savor. Must slow down. Her eyes were liquid heat as they looked him over, her tongue peeking out to ease her swollen lips. That image now forever burned into his mind. He growled.

“You’ve done it now,” he whispered as his hands cupped her breasts, plumping them together. They fit perfectly in his palms.

He wrapped his mouth around her nipple, suckling it into his mouth with slow heavy draws, her body writhing under his. His mind was blessedly blank—everything driving toward one end.

He felt the soft heat of her thighs wrap around his waist and nearly spilled right then. He released her nipple with a sharp tug, so he could look up at her and glare.

“I’m severely lacking control here.” He reached down and shifted his erection so it nestled between her folds, her slick heat stealing his breath.

Her hand came to his cheek, turning his face back to hers. And he could see the excitement and need radiating off her. Her lust was magnificent, and all his.

“Did you break her?”

“I left her with nothing,” he said, panting as he tried to regain some composure. “Her guards exploded under my hell-flames.” He smiled down at her, some sense returning to his brain. “It was quite the spectacle.”

Mara’s eyes were heavy, her hips rocking up to meet his, her wetness coating his shaft. And there went his sense again.

With a growl his tongue flicked against her other nipple, dragging it roughly into his mouth, his patience nonexistent. His hand went between

them, fingers sliding through her folds and easing into her tight sheath.

She pulsed around his fingers as his thumb circled her clit, moisture pooling into his hand, her hands grasping at his shoulders, breaths breaking on soft mewling cries.

“All the fucking hells.” He rested his forehead between her breasts, trying to catch his breath and some composure.

With a growl, he eased out his fingers and slid off the bed, kneeling between her thighs and grabbing her ass to slide her towards him. He spread her open with his thumbs and pressed his open mouth to her center.

Her hot honey flooded his tongue, and he groaned against her flesh, the taste of her like a homecoming. He set in devouring her with the fervor of the starvation that was driving him, giving no quarter.

Her pulsing grew deeper, her moans raspy. She moved to sit up, grabbing and pulling at his shoulders, he suckled harder, his tongue finding her swollen bud and flicking against it.

With a throaty moan, she fell back, her body arching as she ground herself up against his mouth, crying out as her release took over. She pulsed against his tongue, her empty sheath clenching, moisture pooling out. He lapped up every drop as she writhed against him.

“Uhgn. *Yes*.” Her hips rocked weakly, her body sated.

“Is that all you’ve got?” He smiled against her inner thigh, giving it a quick kiss. “I think not. I wasn’t done with you yet.”

He eased two fingers inside of her and she cried out. A wicked smile curling his lips with the knowledge that those fools listening at her doors would surely have heard. She wasn’t in his bed, yet, but that didn’t make her any less his.

“That’s what I thought.” He smiled wickedly as his fingers dragged back over the swollen spot inside of her. “You’re going to take it like a good little girl…”

“Demon,” she growled out in warning, her next words cut off by a sharp intake of breath.

“Yes Mara?” He leaned in and ran his tongue around her clit, teasing a deeper response. His own erection was throbbing painfully, pounding up his spine with the need to release.

Just had to coax one more…

He stirred his fingers in her tight sheath, her body jerking with each drag over her swollen g-spot, his tongue pressing all the right

counterpoints until she was clenching hard—milking his fingers. Hells but that should be his cock…

He suckled her hardened clit into his mouth, sucking sharply as he gently put his teeth around it and flicked the very tip with his tongue…

She screamed. His mind blanking as he heard her cry his name. Not demon. Not Sin. *Cassius.*

Moisture came out in a gush and he stopped breathing, his body tight and on the verge of fucking erupting.

She snarled and sat up, hauling him up on to the bed before he could recollect himself, straddling his waist and looking down at him all flushed rosy and well-pleased.

All he could do was breathe.

“Remember, demon, you brought this upon yourself.” She smiled down at him and an inkling of worry had him swallowing hard.

Her hot little tongue ran up the length of his shaft, her soft hands cupping his balls, the tips of her claws vaguely threatening. Oddly exciting. Comprehension abandoned him as her hot mouth wrapped around the crown of his cock, her tongue circling.

“Fuck. Hell. I’m not going to last.” He threaded his fingers through her hair, resting his hand against the back of her head, rocking up into her mouth.

She stopped sucking, releasing him with a pop. “Easy now sin-eater, lie still like a good boy.”

He groaned as she threw his own taunts back at him.

Hells he should’ve known better—she matched him in every way.

A wave of pleasure shot through him as she sucked him back in, nestled right tight to the back of her throat as she groaned, the vibrations shooting right up his spine. Her free hand wrapped around the base of his shaft, squeezing as her mouth pulled back, and with a hoarse cry, his climax exploded from him.

He panted heavily, his hand petting down her hair as he tried to put his scrambled brain back together. Embarrassment lightly shaded his cheeks. He couldn’t remember ever having such little control.

She climbed up and plopped down beside him, half laying over him with a self-satisfied smirk on her lips. His thumb ran along the swelled plumpness of her lower one, wanting to ease the redness.

Their bodies were both slick with sweat, her fingers running light circles over his chest as he played with her hair, lightly dozing. Basking, more like.

“Oh shit,” Agate said as she burst into the room. Mara quickly grabbed up a blanket to toss over them, shooting a glare in Agate’s direction.

“I didn’t know you had…” Agate cleared her throat, turning her beet-red face toward the door. “Company. I’ll just go?”

“You’re, uh… not interrupting.” Mara gave him an apologetic look, and he just smiled back. They had all the time in the world. She smiled, light once again shining in her eyes. He’d done that.

“It’s just that.” Agate shifted uncomfortably. “The Masters are getting restless.” She hitched her thumb over her shoulder, indicating the door that led to the temple.

“Dark gods, I forgot I called a meeting.” She sat up, pressing the blanket to her chest, searching for her robes. Cass obligingly held up the silks with a smile full of promise.

Mara slapped his chest laughing. “Dammit Sin. You’re distracting.”

“My pleasure,” he said, his lids going heavy as he watched her wrap herself back up. “We’re not done here, Mara.” He grabbed her hand when she went to get up and pulled her down for one more kiss. “I’ll be back for you.”

Her smile slipped slightly, but her eyes still shone. “I’ll be waiting.”

95

BUILDING DREAMS ON SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

His eyes kept wandering back to the carved wooden cradle. The implications behind it made his gut churn. His child would soon be in there. *His daughter.*

The cradle was Amara's; it had been hers when she'd been an infant and had obviously been carefully stored and cared for so that one day her own children could use it.

He glared at it, then turned back to the book on his lap.

He managed to read the same sentence three times in a row before he gave up and closed the book, dropping it to the side table with a heavy thud.

He stood and paced, the cradle taunting him.

Only if they have your eyes.

He knew what he had to do.

He stalked over to it, grasping the sides, intending to heave it into Jez's room. The wood grain was worn, soft as silk. He dragged his fingertips over the engraved protective runes and tried to imagine what she'd looked like as a baby.

What would his daughter look like? Her mother? Leira was undeniably beautiful, but in a generic way, one he'd become desensitized to. He'd had many beautiful females in his bed. They weren't interesting.

He liked character. The dent in Mara's bottom lip, the one that sat perfectly over the curve of her chin. The tiny dimple when she smiled fully…

Would she have wings? He didn't know of a female born of Erinyes blood that didn't have them. He tilted his head to study the size of the cradle, contemplating how big baby wings would be.

Little princess with wings.

He'd make her a nursery.

With that decided, he dragged the cradle to his doorway, the thing heavier than he'd thought. He gave a good tug and his back slammed into an immovable object.

"Careful!"

His Herald.

"Give me a hand, will you?" Cass stopped and swiped his hands down his pants. This would be easier if there were somewhere to grip.

Jez was chuckling as he moved to the other side. "Going to toss it in the pits?"

Cass gawked. "This was Mara's." He gave the angel a look of disgust. "I'm going to make her a nursery."

"For Mara?" Jez frowned. "Seems a bit late…"

"No. For my daughter." He started inching it across the basalt flagstones once more, the effort much more manageable once Jez finally pitched in.

They pushed and pulled it into the room directly across the hall which wasn't dusty and unused as Cass feared. It was empty but had obviously been kept up. Perhaps it had been intended for his Herald.

They moved it into a corner and Cass slumped on the ground beside it, leaning against the wood.

"What was the name of the swan in swan lake?" Cass mused as he brushed invisible dust off his pants.

Jez laughed. "I have no fucking clue. Like the ballet?"

Cass just rolled his eyes. He'd figure it out. His little winged princess would have a good name.

A frantic pounding on the door across the hall caught both their attention. His room. Jez jumped to his feet and beat Cass to the door.

"…all I know is that the Erinyes contacted us through the portal and said it was urgent." The guard at the door was saying.

"We'll head down right away." Jez nodded and closed the door in the guard's face.

He turned back to Cass, swiping his hands down his face before stretching out.

Enkara was pacing, she lunged and grabbed Jez's shoulders the minute they fully came through. His apartment didn't look like his own anymore, furniture had been moved and replaced, the works of art he had collected during his escapades on Gaia no longer framed upon the walls. Leira had made herself at home.

"I stopped the worst of it." Enkara was talking quickly, dragging Jez along, "I don't know enough about poisons."

"Poisons?" Cass fell into step with them.

Enkara stopped and turned to Cass. "They didn't tell you why I sent for you?"

Cass growled. "No. Tell me now." He felt his power throbbing, with no outlet. Here on the mortal plane, he was kept in check.

"She took something. I didn't know if it was meant to end the pregnancy or her life." Enkara's voice was full of censure, her expression wary as she took in Cass's ticking jaw. She stepped back, leaning in closer to Jez, who had gone as still as Cass himself.

"I looked it up on the internet like you showed me," she spoke lowly to Jez and Cass did a double-take.

"You know how to use the internet?" His nose scrunched up. It didn't fit his perception of the angel.

"I lived in this realm for years before they caught up with me." Jez raised one brow in a condescending arch.

"I didn't know."

"You didn't ask." Jez opened the bedroom door and peered in.

"From what I found," Enkara kept speaking with a roll of her eyes, "she's likely purged enough of it that that the poison won't have reached the womb."

He was going to tear out her throat. She dared to try and hurt his daughter?

He pushed Enkara and Jez aside and rushed into his bedroom.

Leira looked pale and waxen laying atop pillows, eyes closed. Rage burned through him.

She. Dared. Much.

"She's too thin." He turned and snarled at Enkara. "Is she not eating?"

Enkara stood her ground even in the face of his rage. “She’s thin because that’s how she’s built.” She moved around Cass and walked to the bed, pushing the blankets down to Leira’s waist.

Sure enough, she had a little swell of a belly, and he forgot how to breathe for a moment until his ears started ringing.

He stepped up beside Enkara, his hand reaching for the bump, magnetized, searching out the energy bundled inside.

The spark was there, frazzled but thriving still. And reaching for him, just like Mara said she had with her. She was a curious little thing, his daughter.

Leira was lucky. If she’d harmed this precious burgeoning life, he would’ve strangled the rest of her life from her body. He felt the energy warming to his touch, twining with his. His insides warmed.

“She prefers the meat pies from the market at the shore,” Enkara whispered, “that’s where I was today when she drank whatever she did.”

He would tear apart anything that threatened his daughter.

Leira’s eyes blinked open slowly, catching his. Yes, including her mother. No, she was no more a mother than Asmodeus had been a father. His daughter would have a mother who loved her, who would protect her fiercely. There was only one who fit that description.

Leira gasped when she caught his gaze, scrambled up, pointing to a mixing bowl sitting on the floor by the bed. Cass shoved it at her just in time for her to retch into it, vomiting up foam.

He stood there, helplessly watching. The sudden weight of Jez’s hand on his shoulder had him jumping.

“Want me to go see if Amara has an anti-toxin?” Jez said quietly, his eyes burning with a seething hatred as they landed on Leira. “She won’t hesitate to help the babe.”

Cass stilled. Jez and Mara were on a first name basis now? Would he dare ask her to save Leira’s life?

“What did you take Leira?” He kept his voice low, trying to hide the rage. “For you or for the baby?” His throat dried as he tried to get the words out.

She looked up, spitting once more into the bowl before answering.

“It was meant to hurt you,” she snarled weakly. “You were supposed to love me!” She shrieked, her trembling hands nearly upending the bowl, only Enkara’s quick movements saved it from disaster.

Cass strode quickly back to her side. “I don’t love,” he sneered, his hand grasping her chin and tilting her face to his. “I’m a demon. You’d do best to remember that next time you think to endanger my property.” He growled and swung back to face Jez.

“She doesn’t need an anti-toxin. My daughter is unharmed, she’s only made herself suffer.”

Leira squeaked, her hand pressing against the swell of her belly. “Daughter?”

Cass growled at her again, pulling her hand away. It was too late for her to pretend herself capable of motherly instincts.

“Pack up her stuff,” he said to Enkara, moving back from the bed before he was tempted to do further harm. “She’s coming back to the fortress and will be heavily guarded.” He gnashed his teeth together.

Lock her in a five by five cell and throw away the key

“I won’t see her imprisoned, but have her watched around the clock.”

He heard the hiss before he felt a searing pain down his back. He spun and grabbed Leira up by her arms, giving her a shake.

“Attack me, or the child again and I won’t hesitate to keep you in chains for the remainder of the pregnancy.”

He dropped Leira, pushing her towards Enkara. “Jez, take them back please.” He went and sat on his bed and hunched his shoulders, leaning down on to his knees with a heavy sigh.

Jez hesitated in the doorway, his hand slapping the frame. “You’re coming right behind, yes?”

“I can’t trust myself around her. Just take her now.”

Was he turning into his father? Nothing frightened him more.

96

ENTANGLED AND DROWNING

HAVING LEIRA BACK IN HIS HOME MADE HIM RESTLESS. SHE HAD SOME connection to his sister. Glasya had somehow gotten inside his vault—*his father's vaults*—got the ring he'd commissioned and freed the Erinyes from her guarded room. He had traitors in his midst. *A viper's nest*. Still, he needed her to be here. Needed to be sure his daughter was protected. Gaia was not an option, anywhere else in the realms he didn't trust that the warlocks wouldn't simply kill her on sight. They were champions at holding grudges.

His mind was a mess, there were moments he was left questioning his sanity, gaps of time he'd lose without explanation, because of this Jez was now his constant shadow, never letting him out of his sight.

He hadn't fed—the thought of taking another female made his stomach churn and his mind revolt. He told her he'd be back for her, duty had interfered. He wouldn't allow anyone else to touch him, his body was his own and dammit, he was finally strong enough to enforce that.

For now.

Until he had no choice but to feed. The corruption of the pits was enough to tide him over, enough to keep him alive—but not thriving. He knew it was going to come to having his choice taken from him. He was Prince of Lust, he needed to incite and feed off that sin. To maintain his strength, he couldn't view sex as anything but impersonal. It couldn't be intimate. Couldn't mean anything.

Being with Mara had been an anomaly, and because of it, he hadn't fed off her. Hadn't wanted it to be about that, had wanted that to remain *pure*. A mind-boggling thought considering the two creatures involved, but there was something he craved which had nothing to do with sustenance. Something he shouldn't and *couldn't* afford to be focusing on. But soon.

Jez lay across his lap, paging through an erotic novel featuring BDSM, every once in a while muttering about 'women actually liking this shit', leaving Cass to stare off into the fire lost to thought, trying to work out Glasya's likely next move. He knew her allies, he knew her motives, he knew her goal, but her actual plan kept eluding him. He had taken everything away from her, hadn't he?

The door to his room opened and Cass whipped around to see Az sliding in and quickly closing it behind him. He looked up and met Cass's eyes and Cass's blood went cold.

"What did she do?" Cass said, silently groaning.

He'd come to the conclusion that she'd likely camp out in his halls. He wouldn't even be able to force her to leave since they were a part of the Nessus and not his personal space.

At Az's blank look Cass shook his head. Right, not everyone was listening to the narrative running through his head…

"Is it Glasya? Is she here?" He amended.

Az shook his head and scrubbed his hands down his face. "Not her. Cass…"

Jez sat up at that, laying his book over the arm of the settee. "Now what?"

"Her brother showed up." Az walked in and perched on the arm of the sofa. "Levistus's power isn't what it should be, I'm afraid. His casts are all weakened."

A feeling of dread seeped through his chest.

"What are you talking about? Whose brother?" Cass kept his voice even, though his insides shook. He knew what was coming, didn't want to admit it to himself.

"Leira's brother. Basileus?" Az's brow furrowed. "Did you not know that?"

Cass jumped up and dug his hands into his hair. "No, I fucking did not know that."

“Basileus? Asmodeus’s Herald?” Jez sat forward, reaching for Cass, who neatly evaded his grasp.

“I’m sorry Cass.” Az stood, grasping Cass’s shoulders. “I thought you were aware of that much at least.”

Cass growled, his stomach turning. “Dark Gods. Basileus sat there and watched me take his sister’s virginity.” He shouldn’t be so surprised at that. The Prince of Pleasures was perverse in the very worst of ways. Cass himself had been made victim of it under his ‘tutoring’.

“You have to deal with this Cass. He’s spouting off to all your officials.” Az gave him a shake to maintain his attention.

Cass straightened, steeling himself to confront his personal demons. Demon, in this case. He could call up the hell-flames and just end him…

He followed Az into the main hall, Jez close at his side, power thrumming between them, with an underlying rage.

Bas sat sprawled over Cass’s throne, a gathering of higher demons crowding the bottom of the dais.

“It’s an unappetizing thought I concede, but we cannot afford to lose the support of the warlocks.” Bas’s voice carried through the room.

“And why would we lose their support?” Cass called out, every demon in the room jumping to attention.

Bas smiled brightly, straightening himself in his seat, a malevolent glint in his eyes as he watched Cass walk.

Cass refused to acknowledge to the sick feeling it was causing. Jez put his hand on his arm. Right. Because his Herald could pick up on his feelings. Shame washed through him. He had to face this. Couldn’t keep running.

“A warlock under your care was murdered,” Bas said, tilting his head.

“By *your* sister,” Cass growled out, the crowd parting for him at his approach.

“You publicly threw over their queen for a demoness whore.”

This time Cass grinned coldly. “Again, your sister.”

Is that what Amara’s people believed, that he’d rejected her? He was reminded of the contempt he had seen in Berith’s glare. *Hells*.

“Their Queen and I have personal business. She would never withdraw her support.” He glared Bas down, daring him to go on about his sister. He did.

Bas stood with a shrug. “Not only did you wrong the realm of Asurim, you also betray the demonarchy. There is finally a child to help secure the claim on the throne, yet you refuse to name the child your heir.” Bas’s face was growing red with anger.

“I left my sister in your care.” Bas stepped closer, growling in his face. “How,” he stepped closer still, close enough to whisper, “did you get her pregnant, little prince?”

Cass just shook his head, holding his breath.

Bas put his hand to Cass’s chest, running it down slow. “Virile Prince of Lust.” Bas closed the gap between them and he felt his knees go weak. How in all the hells did Basileus still hold this kind of power over him?

“She’ll not be raising my daughter,” Cass whispered back, swallowing hard.

“Leira should be crowned your permanent consort for all you’ve made her suffer.” Bas growled, leaning in to brush his lips over Cass’s. “And if you were half as intelligent as your sire, you would’ve used this opportunity to solidify your rule.”

Cass stayed still as possible, his insides quaking. “The time of me playing the cards you deal me has ended, Bas.”

“Cassius’s rule is not in question.” Jez stepped up to his side and pulled him back and he began to calm.

Bas reached down and adjusted himself, maintaining eye contact with Cass the entire time, smiling when Cass’s eyes dropped to follow his movement.

“Is it not then? His sister has as much right to inherit as the young prince.” Bas hissed. “Perhaps she should be made aware of your recent foibles.”

“She can try, but you’ll soon find that her own options have been… eradicated,” Cass spoke low, trying to hide the rasp in his voice.

“I’m going to make sure Leira is healthy. You can’t keep me from her and if I have to take her from here to see to her safety, I will.”

“You can’t take her anywhere while she carries my child,” Cass said, crossing his arms over his chest. Seeing Bas’s true nature had put some ground back under his feet. “Try it and you’ll be imprisoned within the Malsheem for theft of my personal property. I have just the cell in mind for you.”

A bubble of humor rose up through his ire, Mara would appreciate the sight of Basileus chained up in her old cell.

Bas narrowed his eyes, licked his lips, thought better of what he was going to say and with a slight nod, turned and walked off.

Cass spun back to address this milling crowd.

“There is no meeting that would call for a gathering in my halls today. Am I to assume everyone here is gathered to discuss the usurping of my throne?” He paced across the platform. “If this is the case, it’s only fair I inform you that likewise, I’m debating having the lot of you imprisoned for treason.”

“My King,” one of them spoke up, groveling.

“If I hear one whisper of an uprising, I know where I’ll start. I’ll strip your essences and leave you as sentient shells.” It was the worst kind of punishment possible, being wiped from existence through the obliteration of the soul. No reincarnation, no afterlife. It would be as if one had never even existed at all.

He couldn’t stay here, his strength was depleted—he needed to feed. It wasn’t right to let his power grow weak when his realms balanced on the precipice.

“Jez,” Cass whispered. “I have to… go feed.”

Jez’s hand landed on his shoulder with a squeeze. “You go. Az and I can watch things here for a night.”

Cass didn’t even wait until he was back in his rooms, just called up a hell-gate in the middle of the hall, walking through to her rooms.

He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. She wasn’t here. He wandered over, fingers trailing over vials of poisons. No. he couldn’t afford the selfishness of oblivion. He needed to be strong. Had to have his head clear to deal with Bas.

“Demon King.” Berith came into her room, startled by Cass’s presence.

“Where is she?” Cass settled on pouring himself a drink, filling a tumbler with the closest decanter. He lacked the energy and calmness of mind to deal with the Dominus right now. It appeared he had a few things to discuss with Mara first.

Berith immediately closed off. “She has business she sees to.” His eyes went to the amulet at Cass’s neck and Cass closed his hand over it protectively before giving the warlock a snarl.

“I assume you came to feed?” Berith said, and Cass wasn’t oblivious to the impertinence in his tone.

“I came to see my priestess.” He kept his own tone even before taking a large swallow of his drink, nearly choking on the potent liquid.

“Let me show you to the temple.” Berith held up his hand in invitation, and he got the feeling the Dominus was inviting him to leave Amara’s private chambers.

With a shrug, Cass tossed back the rest of his disgusting drink and followed Berith out to the temple. There was nothing to gain by staying here if she’d left.

Lust hit him strong and fast upon setting foot within the hall of the temple, his body absorbing it, his power erupting and seeking more. The scent permeating the air was both familiar and enticing, his starved body trembling in anticipation.

But his head wasn’t there. Nor his… heart? It was a ridiculous notion, and yet the most fitting description he could come up with.

He looked around the room, couldn’t spot her. He turned back to ask Berith, but the Dominus appeared to have abandoned him here. He slumped onto the closest daybed lining the walls, settling in beside a couple, the woman riding the man with a slow sensual roll of her hips. This was his temple, his refuge, then why did he feel a stranger here without her?

He groaned and shifted in his seat, letting his head drop against the pillows as his power absorbed what it needed from the room. It wasn’t as direct or effective as participating himself — but it was better than the alternative. He didn’t want to be touched, especially after seeing Bas.

Hands slid up the bottom of his shirt and his eyes opened, meeting the startled ones of a young warlock. Her breath caught, her hands stopped moving as her eyes took in his.

“You’re not,” she said, stammering and stepping back. “You’re a demon. Your eyes,” she gasped.

There was a hearty chuckle from behind her. “Hells, Eris. He’s the Demon *King*,” Agate said, stepping around the clearly shaken female.

“Cassius.” She nodded.

“Agate.” Cass nodded back, too relaxed to move. “Where is she?”

“She wasn’t expecting you… anymore.” Agate’s eyes narrowed.

Right. Cass had left before she'd returned the other night. He'd wanted to return the very next night; he had been distracted dealing with Leira.

"I need to see her," Cass said, turning his head. "What does one do after royally messing up, send flowers?" Did Amara even like flowers?

Agate grabbed his arm and pulled him up. "Come wait in her chambers before you frighten the young ones away." She smiled, though her eyes were still haunted.

"I think Berith didn't want me in her room, or near her..." Cass got to his feet and followed along behind her, feeling sluggish after the unsatisfactory feeding and miserable at the discovery that Mara had been left awaiting his return.

Agate looked back, rolling her eyes. "He's under a few misconceptions. Firstly, he believes Amara doesn't need you. I suspect you both operate under that delusion." Her eyes darkened. "Just wait for her, okay?"

Cass nodded, standing in the middle of her room, looking around as Agate ducked back out.

He walked over to her bed and ran his hand down the soft furs, the scent of her intoxicatingly strong. He stripped down to his underwear and crawled in. No better place to wait for her, he could sense her here, and he was tired. So very tired.

His mind slipped into a dream—or memory—he wasn't even sure he was sleeping, just seized with pain and terror.

His shoulders ached, there were a million pins and needles throughout his arms as the feeling came back, and he could barely stand for the weakness through his body. Bas was washing him, and it took his bleary mind a few moments to catch up and realize how intimate things were becoming.

Hells, even when his body was in this state? Bas had no shame.

He'd been hanging from his chains for countless hours, locked away from any windows so it was hard to mark the passage of time, and for the first time, he got a clear inkling of how Mara's life was. He'd starved, been denied interaction, had nothing but his own thoughts to dwell upon.

They'd been betrayed. They never had a chance.

He had no idea how long he'd hung from those chains. No idea what had become of Mara. His body was flooded with so much worry and yes, fear. It was no wonder he couldn't grasp a coherent thought.

Their kiss had been magical, he'd never felt anything like it.

Not just lust, but desire.

That's how it was supposed to be.

Thoughts were scrambling around in his tired mind, and he had no care to try to control them. He was tired. So damned tired. So damned defeated.

Bas gently lathered soap through his hair and Cass's eyes drifted closed. How long had he been hanging there starving? Was it his father's intention to weaken him? Bas's hand cradled the back of his head as he poured water over his hair, rinsing the soap.

Cass opened his eyes when he felt the other demon's lips on his own. He didn't have the strength… his mouth moved mechanically under Bas's ministrations, his eyes refusing to open.

"Now Cassius," Bas whispered against his cheek. "I think you should thank me properly."

He blinked open his eyes when Bas no longer touched his face; the blood draining from his cheeks when he saw Bas undoing his pants. He didn't have the strength to fight.

Just had to get through this, then he could sneak off and make sure she was okay. He'd done worse… been subject to worse.

Bas lifted Cass, helping him sit up, then trailed his hand up his chest and rested his thumb on his lip.

"Just a taste little prince." Bas's eyes had gone heavy, his hand stroking his erection as his other thumb pulled on Cass's lip. "You're starving for it aren't you?" His voice was a sultry rasp.

Was he? He couldn't even think straight. Starved was the least of it.

He took as much as he could, Bas cradling his jaw as he fed his erection all the way to the back of Cass's throat. He gagged, his eyes watering, but Bas's hand at the back of his head held him steady.

Suddenly, Bas was ripped back, and blinding pain shot through Cass's head as a fist connected with his nose. His head slammed back against the side of the tub, his ears ringing.

A hand gripped his hair, pushing him under the water, holding him there until his lungs burned and his body flooded with panic. This was it. He feebly tried to fight off the grip on his head, his movements weak from the lack of oxygen.

Then he just gave up. Opened his mouth and dragged the water into his lungs, praying it would be painless…

His hair was yanked hard, dragging him up and out of the tub, leaving him scrambling to climb out before his hair was ripped out of his head. He was tossed on the floor, his arms automatically going up to shield his face.

Not before he saw his father looming over him, red-faced.

"Don't you touch my herald like that," Asmodeus yelled, his booted heel coming down hard on Cass's hand.

Touch him like that? Did his father not realize that had been going on for years?

"Weak, cowardly excuse for a son." His boot landed in Cass's ribs, causing him to slide across the floor, the pain in his head and hand forgotten as the nerves in his body screamed with his next breath.

His father picked him up, only to throw him against the thick glass of the mirrored wall. He felt his skull crack; it resonated through his head with a thud. His shoulder popped, his arm hanging limp.

Every breath was a sharp agony, the pain so intense it was keeping his bleary brain alert. His vision wouldn't focus, he couldn't follow his father's quick movements.

His father's hand grasped his cheeks, his blue eyes blazing, shining too brightly.

"You think to take over my rule?" Asmodeus snarled. "I'm going to break you so thoroughly you'll crawl after me to beg my forgiveness."

He grabbed Cass's arm, the one that was just hanging, and pulled him forward to meet the fist that was aiming for his gut. Cass realized his collarbone wasn't sitting as it should, barely had time to register that as the fist in his gut stole all the air left in his lungs.

He dropped to his knees the moment his father let him go, gasping for air, the pain in his ribs screaming through him.

His father was saying something to Basileus, the words didn't register in his brain that kept blinking out of consciousness.

"We just wanted our freedom," he thought he spoke clearly enough to be heard, but his words were slurring, his jaw not moving the way he'd wanted. "Just to live." He looked up in time to see his father's fist coming down at his face again.

It landed across his temple, knocking him over and into blessed unconsciousness.

He didn't get a reprieve, coming to as Bas was pulling pants onto him, his father pacing and blustering, flaming wings blaring from his back.

"… shouldn't even allow him to live." His father was mumbling. Or his brain was dulling his reality. "Perhaps killing the warlock will remind him of his place."

* * *

HE JUMPED, his heart pounding, it took him a few breaths to realize it was *her* hand trailing through his hair. With a low groan, he wrapped his arm over her and pulled her tight to his chest.

"Hello." Her smile was gentle as she gazed up at him.

"Did you know, Mara?" he said, his voice still rough with sleep.

"Afraid you'll need to be a little more specific." Her smile faltered.

"Did you know she was Bas's sister?" He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, wanting her smile back. Instead, she stiffened against him and he ran his hand down her back, trying to relax her.

"He has a sister?"

"Leira." He leaned back so he could see her expression and felt a mixture of relief and regret flush through him at the sight of the repulsion filling her eyes.

"He just showed up there. Levistus's power is too weak to keep him bound."

Her fingers trailed down his face. "He can't touch you."

Cass swallowed hard. Truth was, he didn't know if he had it in him to stop Bas if he tried.

97

ALL JUDGEMENT ASIDE

THERE WAS A MOMENT WHERE AMARA FEARED SHE WAS GOING TO BE SICK, his revelation causing her stomach to plummet towards her toes while its contents decidedly ventured upwards. How in the nine hells had they so thoroughly missed the mark on that twist?

In hindsight, it made perfect sense, so much, in fact, it was almost embarrassing to admit she'd remained clueless.

She'd looked into his family history, there had been no records of any siblings in Basileus's lineage, and her spies had never made any mention of extramarital offspring. Alas, spies could be paid off. And she already knew most documents and historical records pertaining to Hell and the Demonarchy to be unreliable sources. Asmodeus had seen them all altered during his long reign as if attempting to rewrite history to his own liking. And for the most part, he'd succeeded.

This explained how Leira, an unknown and untrained Erinyes had suddenly risen from ambiguity to claim the much sought after position of a royal courtesan within the Demon king's private harem.

Basileus had practically re-raised the demon after Asmodeus had ripped away his soul. Given that much influence, the Prince of Pleasures had ensured he would forever hold a margin of power over the sin-eater. A victim never truly forgot their tormentor, nor their torment.

Similarly, the Demon Prince had likely groomed his sister to be a pawn in his games from the very beginning. Uncaring that she would likely end

up consumed by corruption. This explained how Leira and Glasya had come to be allies.

With a soft sigh Amara moved to brush the tip of her nose against the sin-eater's. She could see the price of their actions reflected within those coal dark eyes, they were dulled with weariness and defeat.

"Demon, It doesn't matter whose sister she is. Leira is but a temporary problem, she's promised to me as soon as the babe is born. I'm considering having it declared a national holiday."

She hoped for a small smile at her taunt, or beratement at her eagerness to kill the Erinyes, anything but that defeat and sorrow reflected in his gaze. It didn't work. So instead she decided to try something she herself lacked experience in, she would try to comfort him.

"You are so much stronger than they are. They play these games because they fear you'll one day come to realize this for yourself. They know, just as I do, that when that day comes they'll have no chance of defeating you."

"Am I stronger Mara?" He tilted up his head and curled his fingers below her chin, lifting her gaze to lock with his own. "I don't recall ever feeling this weary."

She chuffed. "That's simply because you've allowed it, or did you think I wouldn't sense the Nessus weakening? Sin... you need to feed."

Grabbing her hands within his own he brushed his lips along every single one, lightly kissing her stained skin.

"Are you offering?"

Her fingers moved to splay along his cheek, her gaze holding his captive, needing to see the truth in his answer.

"I know it's what you need demon, but is it what you want… to feed?"

"Yes... no." The sigh he released was an odd mixture between relief and frustration as he held her. "Hells Mara, I don't think I've wanted much in life as fiercely as I want you."

His eyes closed, his lips thinning as he tried to collect his thoughts. "I am tainted by him. I despise him and yet I lusted for his touch as soon as he reached for me. My body, my mind—they're not my own. It disgusts me, it should disgust you. I don't want his mark on you, on us."

"I am disgusted, but none of it reflects on you. For years you were abandoned to his mercy, in that time Basileus shaped you, trained your body and controlled your mind. What he did is a violation, and because of

it, he'll always have some degree of power over you. Don't judge yourself too harshly for responding the way you were programmed, judge only him for it. I do."

His eyes opened, gaze locking with hers. For a long moment, he simply stared at her, his brows knitting in thought before she sensed something dark and volatile move through him.

"You never speak of what happened to you in the Malsheem, what he did to you…"

This time she was the one forced to look away. She knew he was genuinely trying to reach out, to help. But Basileus had been responsible for three hundred years of pure agony, the kind not even she could reconcile with.

"I can't, not without giving it power over me. Perhaps someday, once he's dead and buried."

That darkness becoming something more recognizable, anger. But his hold was gentle, his whispered words a promise. "I will kill him."

"I know."

Again there was a brief moment of silence, tonight she would make the choice for him. "But you won't succeed in this condition, honestly demon you pushed yourself too far with this new diet of yours."

She couldn't help the small grin curling the corner of her lips "I swear, I've seen corpses more lively than you."

He glared, and she smiled, for at least the sadness and defeat which had ruled him upon waking were gone from his eyes. It was a small victory, but she would claim it wholly.

"But that's okay, there are other ways of getting you back on your feet. My dungeons are full, and I have some time to kill..."

Finally, a small spark of humor flared through those eyes. "You realize that expression isn't supposed to be used in the literal sense."

She blinked innocently at him. "It isn't? Anyway, since you're currently too weak to empower the Nessus, we shall simply make it so the Nessus empowers you. Fortunately for us, there happens to be a lunar eclipse casting a shadow over Gaia tomorrow. I think by harvesting its energy and infusing it with the offering of nine souls, we should have you back in fighting form before the night is done."

"Thank you, Mara… and… I truly was planning to return to you. I didn't mean to..."

She pressed her finger to his lips and grinned. “I like emeralds, the more ostentatious the better. If you’re going to apologize, you might as well do it properly”

“Mara…”

“Hmm?”

She felt him shift against her, his hands encircling her waist.

“Are you coming to bed?”

“Cheeky demon, you have the audacity to invite me into my own bed?”

The room tilted as she was spun around, suddenly finding herself pressed into soft and giving fur by his hard, warm body. “No, I’m insisting.”

The lingering tension in her muscles eased when his fingers began a lazy trail down her side. Her own fingers raking through his hair, her legs entwining with his. Despite the cool air of the Asurian night, she felt warm.

“Did you receive the cradle I sent?”

He swallowed, then moved to sprawl his long frame next to her while pulling her close, his arm encircling her waist. “I did, and because of it, I’ve begun to prepare a nursery for her. And I decided on a name…”

“Odile?”

“Close, Odette.” He looked over to her, his expression stunned. “Wait, how did you know?”

She didn’t bother to hide her smugness at his surprise. “Because she told me, guess I must’ve misheard. But in my defense, I was suffering a bit of shock myself.”

It wouldn’t be their child resting inside the cradle, it wouldn’t be her guarding over the infant as it slept, she wouldn’t be part of Odette’s life. But Odette would have his smile, and she would love him, and that was enough for Amara to already love her in turn.

Neither of them spoke, too caught up in simply enjoying this rare moment of peace and safety, made infinitely more precious by the knowledge that it wouldn’t last. Basking in the comfort found within the other’s embrace while gazing at the dance of shadow and light cast by the firelight from the hearth.

After long moments it was Amara who finally broke their silence.

“Sin, we need to prepare for a coup.”

He pulled her closer, letting loose a mulish grumble while burying his head in the crook of her neck as if to protest her words, but she knew he was listening.

“Already Glasya and Leira have succeeded in sowing further discord between our realms. Should the need for support arise, I fear my armies won’t be as eager to come to the defense of the Nessus as they once were.”

She followed her words by pressing a kiss against his forehead when his head snapped up. “Not that they’ll be given a choice in the matter.”

His cheek brushed against her own, the caress innocent yet devastatingly intimate. “I want to see us rule under a joined banner one day, Mara.”

She quirked a brow then bumped her forehead against his. “You ask for the impossible, knowing the nature of both our races, they would just as likely start a war arguing what colors the banner should be.”

His lips turned up at the corners in a lazy grin. “Pastels?”

She nipped into his bottom lip in retort. “You have a death wish.”

The tease turned on her when he used it to capture her lips. His kiss unusually gentle, a wordless plea for surrender. She tasted him with the tip of her tongue, tracing the swell of his lips, and when finally she parted her own lips to his. His tongue invaded, hers countered, and the world fell away.

His taste, his warmth, his breath everything she was and had been clung to him as if she would cease to exist should he remove his mouth from hers. His scent, his heartbeat, his weight pressing down on her, she absorbed it all, needing him closer still.

It couldn’t be right, she was letting her own yearnings fool her senses. Yet even realizing this, she couldn’t deny that the kiss felt familiar. She had been kissed like this once before. *Once upon another life.*

His arms pulled her close when slowly, yet too swiftly, the kiss ended. Her heart raced, so did his. Her mind spun, his hold tightened. And again they were left to the silence of the room and the machinations of their own thoughts.

“What were you dreaming about before you woke?”

“Not a dream, a memory.”

Easing further into his hold she reached for the layers of silk and furs draping the bed, covering them both while pretending they could hide away from the world within the safety of this bed.

“There is only pain in memories, demon, you’ve already suffered enough.”

His chin came to rest atop her head. “I want to hear a good one…”

“Sorry?”

“A good memory, Mara, one to help me sleep... to dream.” His whiskey and honey voice sounded heavy with sleep, yet his tone was one of determination.

“I don’t think that is a good idea.”

She felt his lips move against her crown. “If you don’t, I’ll inform Levistus that you’ve requested he gives you a lecture on the history of the demonarchy, starting with the houses of the nobles.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t dare…”

She could actually feel the grin that twisted his lips.

“Try me…” And knew at that moment he’d won.

One innocent memory, one that held no triggers or information that could jar his mind. A simple moment they’d shared, one that would ease his chaotic mind, give it something to cling to… she could do that.

“You once brought me a book, only to discover I couldn’t read it. It wasn’t too long after Aza discovered us. Not only did you convince him to hold our friendship a secret, but to tutor us together. All the hours you were supposed to have spent with Aza in a classroom you spent instead with me inside the dungeons, insisting I learn. You were so convinced I would one day escape that prison, even when I wasn’t.”

His breathing evened out against her back, the strong arm around her waist relaxing its possessive hold, in his body going languid. The demon was drifting to sleep.

Her own exhaustion had already made her eyelids heavy, her voice drifting off on a yawn as she tried to finish her story.

“When I finally learned to read words and make sense of scriptures you began to sneak down books from your father’s library, insisting I read them to you.”

Her too heavy eyes fell shut, her words turning to soft, even breaths, while memories took over their sleep.

A howl of laughter snared his attention, rising from inside the tiny cell, Amara’s tittering interrupted by the occasional hiccup.

He wanted to be angry — he was going to be in so much trouble over this. But he’d never heard her make that sound before. Instinctively he

pressed his face closer against the bars, wanting to see that smile, the sound of her hiccups bringing a grin to his own lips. Serves her right.

Movement in his periphery had him turn about, ready to lash at anyone who approached, who could reveal his secret and take her from him. Only to realize there was no one there.

—swish—

Hells, that hadn't been an intruder he'd seen moving, but a tail.

—swish— Was he actually wagging?

He let out a loud groan at the sight of the thin, leathery tail which even now continued to haphazardly whip from side to side, picking up speed in excitement when once again he heard her succumb to a fit of laughter.

"Amata, take it back!"

He could hardly make out her words, drowned as they were by the sound of laughter, wheezing, and hiccups. "Can't… don't… know… how it… happened."

She pushed the tome he'd brought for her back through the iron bars, and he quickly began to scan the pages, looking for a spell or hex that could undo what her words had set in motion. He wasn't angry with her; she hadn't known, had never even cast before this day. But of all the things she could've manifested, she'd given him a bloody tail! How exactly was he supposed to hide the thing?

"What the Hells were you two thinking? Prince Cassius tell me you did not sneak that book from your father's library"

Of course he had. "Okay Az, I won't tell you."

—Swish, swish—

Another howl of laughter burst up, followed by the subdued sound of hiccups from within the tiny cell.

"The spells contained within that book are much too powerful to be utilized by a novice." Azadiel's voice contained a mixture of beratement and pride. "Amara, did you conjure that?"

The laughter stopped instantly, and Cassius could clearly hear the shame that filled her voice. "I'm sorry."

He hated it, he would live with the damned tail if it meant she would laugh again. He wanted to say as much, lash out at their teacher for shaming her, she hadn't even done it on purpose; he'd been the one to ask her to read.

"Az…" —swish—

In his agitation his tail had begun to whip uncontrollably, and right as he had gathered enough courage to confront their teacher, the blasted thing had turned on him and smacked him the face.

—swish, swish—

He reached for it, needing it to stop, but the damned thing kept evading capture. Taunting him.

Mara's laughter returned, and not just hers, Azadiel was wiping away tears from the corner of his eyes, his boisterous laughter joining hers as their teacher reached for the discarded tome on the dungeon floor.

"All right, all right. Let's see this undone and the unfortunate appendage gone before our young prince injures himself. I'll help you two find the correct spell, but no more books from Asmodeus's library, understood?"

Two voices rang out. "Yes, Aza." One hiccuping, the other growling in defeat—his tail clearly having won the battle.

That night for the first time since the Sword of Divine Justice had been unearthed, Amara slept peacefully, her shared memories of innocence a balm to a mind plagued by nightmares of a monster's perversion. And with her in his arms, the demon didn't suffer from nightmares, instead, he could finally dream.

98

ALL HE EVER NEEDED

"I'LL GRANT YOU THAT." JEZ WAS GOING ON, PACING AND GRUMBLING about Cass's refusal to remove Bas from the Nessus. "But if that putrid little fuck tries to say anything…? I won't just send him off to his room." He cracked his knuckles to enunciate his point.

Jez gleaned enough from Cass's riotous emotions to have pieced things together — a bit of a blessing since it was something Cass wouldn't… *couldn't* talk about. His thoughts had been fixated on a constant stream of images. Bas and his priestess — he knew the depravities Basileus was capable of. He'd been taught each and every way to walk the line between pleasure and perversion.

Cass just nodded. "However you need to deal with him." He needed to know his fortress was guarded against Bas's forked tongue. "I doubt he'll stray far from Leira's side though, and I won't be leaving him to wander my fortress at his leisure."

He finished tightening the screw on the wooden rocking horse as Jez leaned over the cradle. The room was coming along nicely, it wasn't right to be dwelling on this while fixing his daughter's room.

The room had an entire bank of windows, lighting it up with the natural glow of the Nessus, reflections of flames on the basalt walls and the constant shine of pale moonlight. He'd have to fix that, find some way to brighten the room for her. He'd find a way to give her the sun… hell, the entire sea of stars too.

“Oh, this is all so lovely,” Leira said from the doorway. She walked into the room with a fluid spin, her gauzy dress swinging around her knees. Her belly was an obvious swell now, protruding from her slight frame, her attire clearly chosen to highlight rather than hide her pregnancy.

She wanted to remind him, every time he turned around she was there, flaunting what she’d stolen. He didn’t bother to expend the energy to react to her taunting, he knew her days were numbered. He treated her with more kindness than she deserved, and as much courtesy as he’d extend to any of his subjects. Because she was good as dead.

Cass got to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, looking her up and down. She looked frail, but her skin was back to its regular color. He could see her resemblance to Basileus now, and he wondered how he’d been so oblivious. Their hair was the same shade, perhaps the shape of her face, the deep swell of her bottom lip…

His body fought between disgust and attraction, his mind firmly settling on anger. His entire life had been sculpted to suit Basileus, and in turn, Asmodeus. Forged to be a weapon in his father’s arsenal. Jez stepped up behind him, his hand on Cass’s shoulder, grip firm. That’s all it took for Cass to realize he was vibrating with rage, tense and ready to attack.

“Why are you here, Leira?” He tucked his fists under his arms to keep himself from reaching out and shaking her.

She smiled sweetly, her eyes devoid of emotion. “I should be where my husband is.”

“Are you mentally deficient?” Jez asked, tone incredulous. Yeah, Cass couldn’t believe she was that stupid either.

She giggled, a high-pitched trill that made the hairs on Cass’s arms stand up. She sounded more unbalanced each day. Made him wonder how well Bas was in fact, taking care of her.

“Look, I don’t want you in here,” he said as he took a slow step towards her, trying to block her out of the room.

She peeked around him, eyes widening as she took in all the new furnishings, a wide smile lit up her face as she turned it up to his.

“What a wonderful surprise.” She patted his cheek, and he jerked back, caught off-guard. She thought he did this for her?

She elbowed past Jez and wandered into the room, stopping by the cradle, causing his breath to catch. Her fingers trailed over the smooth

wood frame, then pressed on the mattress, smoothing her hand back and forth, it froze and her eyes narrowed on the sigils and runes.

“What kinds of spell bindings are these?” she turned back to Cass, her eyes flashing. “This looks like warlock magick.”

Cass braced himself, but Leira’s mounting tirade was interrupted by Az coming in with Levistus, who breathed a collective sigh of relief when they saw him.

“Get it out of here, Cassius, I won’t have my child… *our daughter*, sleeping in this disgusting magick.”

Cass turned to her with a snarl as her foot kicked out at the wooden base.

“Little Leira, you don’t have a say in the matter,” he growled out.

She shrieked, her hands tightening into balls, before turning and swiping out with her claws at the antique wood.

It was Levistus who lunged forward, grabbing her arms and pulling her back to his chest. He was shaking with the effort, his body still weak from whatever torment Glasya had bestowed. Cass hadn’t asked for details.

“Get it OUT OF MY HOUSE,” Leira screeched. “It’s from her, isn’t it?” Her chest heaved as she fought Levistus’s grip.

“You won’t touch it. You’ll not come near it.” Levistus said coldly, shocking them all. He’d catered to the Erinyes since finding out about the baby. “It’s none of your concern.”

“Of course it’s MY CONCERN. It’ll be my child who lays within that filth.” Her voice was shrill, her face red and blotchy as she screamed and fought against Levistus’s hold.

Levistus dragged her to the door. “Go to throne room Cass. Basileus is causing shit again. I’ll stay with Leira. She’ll stay out of trouble.” He looked down at Leira, gripping her wrists. “Won’t you? Wouldn’t do to have no allies among the King’s men.”

She squeaked, and the color drained from her face. Cass made a move to grab her in case she fainted, but Levistus hauled her up to his chest once more, gave Cass a look and dragged her out the door.

“What’s he up to now, Az?” Cass said, his narrowed gaze shifting from the retreating Leira and back to Azadiel.

“You can be certain he’s got plans within his plans.” Az grabbed Cass’s arm and steered him towards the dusty old couch. He’d have to remove that…

“I’ve known Basileus since he became Asmodeus’s Herald. I’ve never known him to openly show his anger as he’s been doing, he’s always been calculated words and schooled expressions.” He paused, his expression thoughtful. “He’s spewing his rage for all to hear, rousing your own demonarchy to his viewpoint. Cass, he’s got something big planned.”

Cass’s expression turned mutinous. “When does he not?”

“He’s clever.” Az continued as though Cass hadn’t spoken, “But he’s no mastermind, someone is pulling his strings. I need to know how you managed to get your father banished.”

Cass’s head jerked back. “Were you not here when he got taken?”

Az shook his head slowly. “I was bound to the Hells.” He turned to face Cass, eyes burning with something akin to regret. “Until six years ago. Right around the time you managed to bring him down. I watched every step you took until that time, every topple of his power supports you and Amara made, I was cheering you on. But I didn’t see the final play. Once my binding was finally removed, I…” He blew out a breath and dropped his face into his hands, running them down his face and clasping behind his neck as he turned to look at the ceiling. “I went to the mortal realm and spent some time there. You understand?”

Cass took a moment to contemplate his words, questions racing through his mind, topping the list was why Az needed to know how they’d finally removed his father from the board.

“My father was greedy for power, he never bothered to hide his love of worship. I… we… set up small movements. Pieces that would add up to appear he was making a grasp for domination, that he was trying to shift the balance.” Cass stood and paced with long strides in front of the couch. “That he had plans to bring down the apocalypse.”

Az’s mouth dropped open, a calculating gleam shining in his eyes and finally a dawning realization. “Cass. He was. That was his end game from the time you were conceived.”

Cass stopped mid-stride, shaking his head with denial. “No, Amara and I made it appear that he was. Carefully placed objects of power… I researched endlessly to figure out which pieces would point that direction…”

Az stood and put his hand to Cass’s chest, over Mara’s sigil. “All he ever needed was you and Amara.”

Cass stumbled back into Jez, his mind reeling and yet blank. Not one thought would stick. He *couldn't remember*…

"Let's go shut that little shit up, yeah?" Jez said carefully, attuned to Cass's chaotic emotions as he was.

All Cass could do was nod.

99

AH, THE SMELL OF GLOATING IN THE MORNING

He didn't know what to expect from Bas, but he felt the proverbial ax hanging over them. Az was right, Bas didn't plot, didn't have a temper. His normal means of sowing discord would've been whispered words in the right ears… it was almost as though he was spiraling without a plan. Like something had upset a well-crafted plot.

He wandered into his throne room and went completely still, Jez crashing into his back, his thoughts coming to a screeching halt in his head. And there it was. If there were ever a more shocking ax fall, he didn't know of it.

There, entwined on his throne was his mostly naked sister and Basileus underneath, working her like the Prince of Pleasures he was.

His fucking throne.

The implications alone…

Her black hair fell like a silk curtain over the armrest of the dark crystal, Basileus's golden skin highlighting the paleness of hers… and there was a lot of it to see. Her hands were wrapped up in the fabric of Bas's shirt, Bas's… one hand was visible, their mouths devouring one another.

He drew his sword, stalking forward without a sound, though the snarling rage was hard to stifle. He stopped before climbing the dais, clearing his mind so he could think coherently. Well, as much as he could think with all the wet noises and throaty moans.

He sheathed his sword and growled audibly.

He didn’t trust himself not to gut her just to watch the life bleed out of her eyes in the slowest manner possible. Imagining it, though, placated his temper. Somewhat.

His mind raced through scenarios of how he could get Glasya back for this trespass, without breaching his blood-sworn contract, but nothing came to mind that didn’t include spiking her to the side of the pit and letting her blood feed the hell-flames.

He wasn’t sure how far he could push the boundaries without invoking his father’s release.

She was in his hall, free of guards, conspiring with his father’s right hand. Or, nearly fornicating with him on Cass’s fucking throne. He had to sit on that, dammit.

“Cassius.” Glasya finally noticed him standing there in his barely contained fury. She stood, easing her clothes back into place, arrogance in every movement. She was in no rush to explain herself.

Cass looked to Bas, the demon’s eyes shining with banked rage. Good. They were on the same page then. No more hiding. No more games.

Glasya stopped walking a few feet from reaching him. Smart of her. “King of the Hells, Heir to my father Asmodeus the God of Sin. Brother dearest.” Her chin tilted, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

She *reeked* of gloating.

“Glasya.” Cass nodded, playing along. “Princess of Corruption, Archduchess of the former Malbolge.” He bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile.

“I’ve come to claim rights to the throne.” Glasya returned the same smile.

For the first time, he noticed all the demons milling about. His own Majordomo, the Executioner, the General of his Pit Fiends… all the important demons in the hierarchy of the Nessus were closing in, curious and trying to hear his and Glasya’s discourse.

Cass climbed up the dais, focusing on counting his steps and simmering his temper. He walked up to Basileus and dragged him off his throne, before turning back to his sister, crossing his arms, not trusting himself not to strangle the life out of her.

He leaned in closer to her and growled out, “by what rights?” His hands were clenched under his arms. “Did you come to test your power against mine?” He arched a brow.

She laughed.

He stepped back, unsure of what she was leading up to. Or had she lost her sanity entirely?

“Ah, Cassius.” She shook her head, sighing, “You were much more pleasant before your pretty soul resurfaced.”

Cass’s body seized with shock, trying to hide his reaction to her words. His soul?

She stepped closer, patting his cheek. “But much less corruptible. You’re just ripe for Namtar’s plucking now.” She tilted her head, studying his chest. “Father’s little golden boy. Knowing how much you’ll suffer when it all comes back makes dealing with your insufferable arrogance worth it. I do hope you live long enough for the defeat to sink in.” She leaned up to hiss into his ear, “this makes it worth enduring your presence.”

“Speak plainly or leave.” With a snarl, power burst from him, forming wings at his back, his hand reached up and grabbed her face, his fingers digging into her cheeks. “You’re pushing the limits of my temper just by showing your face here, if you think to taunt me further, I’ll splay you out in the pits and let the lesser demons partake of your offerings.”

Glasya chuckled darkly. “My, but you remind me of our father at times.”

Cass tightened his fingers, his hand shaking with restraint. Fuck but he wanted to rip her face right off.

“My daughter has just as much right to the throne as you.” Glasya said, her humor gone as she tried to push Cass off. “And power to match your own, or will have, once she learns to draw it from its proper source.”

Cass let go, stumbled back a few steps, his brows knit with confusion.

“You lie.” Someone would’ve told him if there were another in the running for his crown. *His* crown that he’d sacrificed his own *dignity* to attain.

He felt Basileus lingering behind his right side, adrenaline hitting his gut like a fist. All of his senses were haywire and on edge. He couldn’t pay attention to him when he was focused on her.

“When I made my deal and gave up my daughter.” She paused, her steel-blue eyes glinting. “I actually felt a moment of loss. But now I understand. The pieces have fallen in line so perfectly.” She bit her lip, preventing the smile that was curling up her mouth from forming. A poker

player, she was not. “She was supposed to have died that night… and now she’ll be Queen of the Hells.” She reached up and tapped the end of his nose in a playful manner. “And your demise.”

He growled, hand hovering over the pommel of his sword, trying to make sense of her words. He would’ve known if Glasya had an heir. It would’ve been recorded. His father would’ve gloated… would have possibly put Glasya in line before him, regardless of their power difference.

“You doubt me?” She tilted her head and gave him an indulgent smile, her condescension prickling at him. “Not that I blame you, but there is such a simple solution to that dilemma, isn’t there?”

She pressed in closer to him, her hand resting over his heart. “Why don’t you summon her? Call her by her title — the Princess of Agony — and discover my daughter’s existence for yourself.”

He knew he was walking straight into whatever set up she was pushing him toward. Her chin was tilted, her gaze defiant, daring him. He pulled his sword and drew it across his arm before making the conscious decision to do it.

Curiosity burned even hotter than his rage, as did the need to wipe that smug look off her face. He walked down the dais, away from her, trying to get his thoughts in order.

A daughter would be easy enough to deal with. He was the Prince of Lust. He’d broken more powerful beings with that power in his time.

With that assurance in mind, he let his blood run as he paced out a circle and called upon all the powers of the Hells. He wasn’t leaving this to chance. A portal flared to life, all the power of the nine hells directed to his bidding, singing through his veins. The void inside of him roared to life, welcoming home the dark magick, feeding off it—feeding into it.

“Daughter of Glasya.” He looked over to his sister, wariness hitting his gut. Too damned smug. “Princess of *Agony*, granddaughter of Asmodeus, I summon you.”

The words reverberated through the room, making even Glasya flinch back, Basileus close at her side, holding her up by her arm.

He waited a breath, felt nothing. No imprint of magick answering his summons that had been too powerful for any magical being to ignore. He let out a breath, turning to smile menacingly at Glasya. She had nothing…

A powerful wave of rage blasted through the air, the ground trembling beneath his feet with the surge of power he had called forth. What in all the dark gods had he summoned?

A feral creature burst through the portal, surrounding him in tantalizing dark magick that called to his soul. Homecoming. His. The void inside of him was calling out to the creature’s power, and that power sung the sweetest song back.

Oblivion. Destruction.

Made for each other.

The world would kneel at their feet.

100

BIRTHRIGHT IS AGONY

PARALYZING FEAR HIT HER AS A SUMMONS CALLED, ITS ENTHRALLMENT thrumming through her veins as it forced her compliance. Whoever was making a demand for her presence was powerful, dangerous.

"Princess of Agony, granddaughter of Asmodeus, I summon you."

Then recognition sparked, for only one ever dared call her by that title. That awareness was all it took for fear to grow into fury.

Coils of dark energy swirled around her as if it too were eager for her to surrender to the call. Power suffused her, pumping a heavy dose of adrenaline through her system while her magick charged the air. She knew it too had been awaiting this moment.

Time to settle old scores... she had failed once, would not do so again.

Steady fingers clenched around the hilt of her athame, drawing it from the belt around her waist, the energy which was harvested within the steel answered her call.

This time Demonarchy law would be on her side, for she hadn't made a challenge, she'd been summoned. As such, there would be no repercussions to her actions today. The absurdity of that notion was adding a peculiar layer of giddiness to her fury.

From across the room, Berith and Agate were staring at her, their horrified expressions leaving little doubt they too had heard the summons, had felt its power and knew where she was headed.

"We'll be right behind you, Sarratum-sa." Berith's tone sounded much calmer than the storm she sensed brewing within her Dominus. He knew

its significance.

Her lips twisted into a malevolent smile, the gesture marked by cruelty; it was her mother's smile. "Don't be late, I'd hate for you to miss the best part."

When the portal began to whirl open beneath her feet, she didn't resist its pull, didn't try to escape the summons, but leaped without hesitation to fall into its dark void.

The frightened little princess who'd been tossed through a portal all those centuries ago had grown into a fearsome creature, one that craved vengeance. And today she would claim it.

Darkness broke when the radiant glow of the summoning circle rose beneath her feet. Their wards were powerful and would've been her prison. But Amara was long done being caged.

Seven hundred and twenty-nine lives. That was the price due for one get out of jail for free card. She had been harvesting with her athame, and now she was ready to cash in. With a smile and a forceful jab, her blade struck the barrier.

Arcane magick struck against infernal energy. Her own power waiting, darkness coiling as it ever so gently nudged against the barrier. Impatient for the vengeance overdue.

The barrier weakened as long cracks rippled out to spread through the circumference. The sound of freedom. Joining it she let out a screech, a banshee's war cry, and darkness erupted. Its power fused with the furor of shock-waves created by the colliding magicks, tilting the balance — an ear-splitting blast followed as the barrier shattered apart around her. After centuries, the caged animal left its prison.

Extending her hand, her drained athame leaped up off the ground to claim its rightful place within her palm, its sentient blade drained and eager to feed once more. And so it would.

The pull towards her intended victim was instinctual—she had centuries of contempt to guide her. Deaf to the outcries of panic filling the throne room of the Nessus, and blind to the royals and nobles of the Demonarchy, she easily found her target. And in the time-span of one heartbeat, Amara lunged.

Awareness returned only when feeling the curve of a delicate neck within her grasp, her claws sinking into flesh like hooks. And when she

looked up, it was to meet steel-blue eyes, eyes which at one time had meant the world to a condemned little girl.

“Hello, mother.”

She released her grip, only to stomp her booted foot down into Glasya’s chest as soon as she hit the basalt flagstone, crushing ribs on impact.

The hilt of her athame vibrated in her grasp, its blade impatient to be rewarded for its earlier sacrifice. She obliged. Glasya’s screech filled the air when the blade was thrust between her fifth and sixth rib, her brows rose with surprise to find an actual heart beating there. *Will wonders never cease…*

As a child, Amara had only found cruelty and disapproval in her mother’s gaze, no matter how hard she tried or willed it differently. However, this time when gazing into Glasya’s eyes she found more than mere contempt and disapproval, she found a spark which must’ve always been present, but she’d been too innocent to recognize. Corruption and madness had claimed her mother.

Beneath her blade Glasya wheezed, her words broken and saccharine. “My daughter, finally you return to me.”

It wasn’t until she heard the loud crack of bone and felt a dull pain radiate through her own hand that Amara realized she had struck. Her fist barreling into Glasya’s face and breaking her perfectly shaped nose.

“I did warn you *mother*, that next time opportunity arose, I would see you gutted from navel to nose, before claiming your head.”

Nodding to herself Amara withdrew slightly from Glasya’s crumpled form, leaving her athame buried deep inside her heart, where it would drain her life’s energy with each faltering beat. With a swift motion she pulled free a second blade from her boot, glad she’d actually conceded to Agate’s demand she’d wear them today.

She could make out a few horrified shrieks and the sound of struggle among the crowd as the serrated blade of her spare knife sank into her mother’s soft underbelly. Then, with a hard twist, she sliced through skin, muscle, and sinew, cutting directly beneath her navel.

Another wheeze from the woman beneath her, followed by a soft whimper, the unusual sound causing her to look away from where she’d been carving to stare at her mother. Blood stained her beautiful face, her eyes wide, pupils dilated in response to the pain.

“My Amara… The throne is yours daughter, I’ve fought to clear your path.” Her voice was filled with pain, yet Glasya continued to speak. “I’ve declared you my heir, the nobles present will support your claim. The throne of Hell is your birthright just as much as it is his.”

At that, the large hall fell impossibly silent, as if all the air had been sucked out of the room by that declaration.

“My blood runs through you, the blood of Asmodeus runs through you, and you’ve finally grown strong enough to be worthy to take your place.”

The corners of Amara’s lips twisted into a wry smile. “Am I then? Or is it simply that you’ve run out of other options?”

Beneath her, Glasya wheezed as she struggled to get air into her punctured lungs. “Take it, daughter, claim your place as Queen, take the thrones of both Hell and Asurim, then your power will surpass even that of your grandfather. Become Empress, rule the Demonarchy, fulfill your destiny and you can save Asurim from extinction.”

“You’re the one who drained Asurim its limit, and now you bargain for its salvation?” Her body shivered with repressed rage, her finger closing around the hilt of her blade once more, and she twisted the blade, pulling it up into Glasya’s abdomen.

Yet her venomous words lingered. Cassius didn’t wish to rule, not truly. He’d claimed the throne and then foolishly handed control over to Basileus. With so much power at her disposal, she could make things right. Save Asurim, kill every member on her list, claim vengeance on the gods themselves for what she and Cassius had been made to suffer.

“That’s right, just think of it Amara, with all that power the Realms would bow to your will. My daughter, my legacy will become a scourge upon man, immortal, and Gods alike…”

“Yes.” Cold sweat beaded down her spine, her mind swirling with possibilities. Despite all the evil her mother had done, her reasoning was sensible. Wasn’t it? With so much power at her disposal, she could fix everything.

No longer would she be left powerless to the will of others. No longer would those she cared for die at the hands of her enemies. She could save her realm, her people, she could keep the sin-eater safe. This was her destiny.

“Can’t you see that all I’ve done was done for you? I was foretold your path, seers predicted your reign long before your birth. I became a monster

so you would rise above me. So you could unite our people and save us."

An overwhelming sense of righteousness overcame her.

Yes, now she knew what fate had in store for her. She could do it, she would avenge their past and secure the future. Amara, High Priestess to the dark deities, the anointed Queen to the warlock realm, the granddaughter of Asmodeus would rule them all. With the demonarchy at her side, Cassius would be no match against her, she would…

"*NO*!"

The next instant she had thrown herself off her mother's body, placing as much distance between them as she could. The earlier shivers of rage became violent convulsions as Mara reached up to clasp her hands tightly against her head. Her magick hissed and lashed out violently, darkness spilling out in angry dark flames, protecting her. And it was then Amara recognized what it was she was up against. Corruption. Through her own pride and anger, it had taken root inside of her, her own mother's words beguiling her into madness.

The corruption should've been impossible to detect, yet somehow she had *felt* its malevolent presence spread through her as if planting itself deep within. And within her, something had rejected it, fought it. And her magick obeyed its command. Something or someone had protected her while she herself had succumbed.

"Thank you for the offer, but I'm afraid I must decline."

Disbelief shone brightly from her gaze, all trace of triumph and victory which had radiated from those steel blue depths had vanished.

"The throne belongs to us, I would be loyal to you."

Mara's fingers closed around the hilt of the spare blade, pulling it free from the ripped flesh of her abdomen.

"Loyalty? Mother, you really shouldn't use words you don't understand, it's vulgar."

Glasya's shrieks reached a crescendo as the blade continued its earlier trajectory, slicing through intestines, stomach, and liver before its cut was halted by the shattered bones of her ribcage. She abandoned the blade at the sight of her athame, still settled deeply within her mother's heart.

"All I wanted as a little girl was your heart, but I'll settle for your head instead." She had been about to twist the blade of the dagger when the voice of Levistus boomed through the throne hall.

“AMARA, STOP!” His command carried within the compulsion he retained from his glory days as a celestial warrior. And her hand stayed against her will. Her eyes never leaving Glasya’s carved up body. She was so close.

“Still trying to order me around, old man?”

“Enough of this, you have no right to harm the Archduchess. It wasn’t Glasya who summoned you. Kill her and it’ll be your people to suffer the consequences of your actions.”

Her breath faltered, for if this was true, then her claim on Glasya’s life was forfeit. Torture was one thing, but murder would be deemed a crime by demonarchy law, and a war would be unavoidable. For a second time, the price attached to her mother’s head would be too costly to pay.

“If not she, then who?”

Except for her own Dominae and Azadiel, none had prior knowledge of her origins, she’d been expunged from history until she’d risen from Hell to claim her due.

Another voice rose, its tone the familiar notes of whiskey and honey. “Princess of Agony, I was the one to summon you. Welcome home.”

“Cassius.” He now knew the truth of her, of her parentage. And he would judge her for it.

Her Cassius hadn’t cared who or what she was, he trusted her; had loved her. The sin-eater did not, he’d demanded a binding vow of loyalty from her. Had he discovered her parentage, he would never have searched her out, and she would still be caged to the horrors of the Malsheem. He wanted loyalty; she wanted vengeance. At least one of them would get their wish today.

“This is for my father. Since you broke his, I’m taking yours…”

Ragged breaths turned to shrieks and shouts when Amara’s fist plunged into Glasya’s chest, before slowly withdrawing it again, while holding her mother’s weakly beating heart within her grip.

She moved, nearly losing her footing in the slippery pool of blood before skipping over the remaining puddles until she reached the center of the throne room. There she lifted Glasya’s heart high above her head.

“You’ve summoned forth the Princess of agony, heiress of the sixth, daughter of Glasya, granddaughter Asmodeus. Well, here I am.”

She proceeded to give a bow more befitting a circus performance than a royal audience. Then with an exaggerated wave of her free hand, she

cleared a path between herself and the steps to the throne of hell, and its king.

It was only when she approached that her path was blocked by the king’s private guard.

“Let her pass…”

Dark coal eyes locked with hers, curiosity bright within their depths as she came to stand before him, then lowered her head and placed Glasya’s barely used heart at Cassius' feet.

“My King… I offer you the heart of a traitor as a token of my loyalty.”

101

PRIOR CLAIMS

Others were milling about the room, Cass ignored them all. His focus intent on the bundle of furious rage in the center, soaked in blood, her claws eviscerating, her words taunting.

Even in the midst of his confusion and gut-churning realizations, he was smiling. All the hells, but she was made for him.

All the shouting and ruckus surrounding them ignored as she made her way to him, his power even now reaching for hers.

"My King," she said, her head bowed to him.

She laid a heart at his feet—how could he resist her?

He grabbed her hand, pulling her to his chest, twining his fingers through hers, wrapping his arm around her waist and pressing tight to her body, twirling her around and smiling down at her.

"Mara. My Mara," he purred, feeling satisfaction all the way to his soul as their power intertwined, merging them so completely he doubted they would ever be separate again.

She blinked up at him, her lips parting, and he spun her again, laughing.

He moved his hand from her body long enough to swipe the blood splatters from her lips, then grabbed her waist tight as his mouth descended on hers. She growled against his lips and his breath caught, his teeth dragging across her lower lip. He was far too on edge to lead her into a response. He was taking, and he was having it now.

The murmurs and shouts of the crowded room faded away, as they cocooned themselves in a world all of their own. The only two beings in existence. She was his, and he was hers.

His hands tightened on her waist, testing the firmness of her flesh, squeezing and drawing her in closer. He wanted to devour her. Their hands pressed together, he wasn't willing to let it go not even to wrap his arms around her.

He broke off their kiss, panting against her mouth, eyes locking with hers. This was everything. He didn't care if he remembered it all, he remembered enough. *She was his.*

They had all the time in the worlds to rebuild what was lost to them. *What had been taken away from them.*

"Cass you have to let me go," she said, as reason returned to her eyes.

He growled, palmed the back of her head and brought it tight to his chest.

"I won't," he murmured against her hair. "Not ever again. Don't ask that of me, not after everything."

"But." She tried to move her head back, he wasn't letting go. Just swaying back and forth, as though they were dancing to a tune that only the two of them could hear. "She's my mother."

"And now there are no more secrets." He kissed the top of her head and ran his hand down her hair, finally freeing her.

She looked up at him, allowing her darkened thoughts to show, his hand finding a band of bare skin between the waistband of her pants and her shirt, his fingers greedily spreading over as much of it as they could.

Her body swayed into his touch, her breath hitching, cheeks flushing, his fingers searching. Her clothes were starting to stick to her as the blood dried.

The shouts of the crowd started insinuating on their private moment, reminding Cass they were in his main hall, where anyone could just walk in, he shifted Mara to his side, arm firmly around her waist as he surveyed the lot of them.

Jez was leaning against Cass's throne, staring down the gathered crowd, daring any one of them to make a move. Always protecting Cass. Levistus stared blankly at the heap of Glasya, who lay unmoving but undoubtedly would survive. Glasya had tricked him into summoning

Amara, effectively binding her hands, preventing her daughter from claiming her head. A pity really.

Leira cowardly clung to Basileus's side, her brother would ensure to her safety, and that of the child she carried in her womb. Cass trusted Bas's self-serving instincts enough to where he would see the heir to the throne safely born.

And Az, he was stock-still, his expression wary, as though in anticipation.

Cass grinned, he would hate to disappoint.

He turned and led Mara up his dais, grabbing both of her hands in his and pressing a quick kiss to her lips. His fingers laced through hers, lifting her hands to his neck before sliding his hands up her arms and down to her sides.

"Don't deny me this," he whispered, only her and Jez within earshot.

Her expression darkened, her gaze growing shuttered. She still had her secrets. She could keep them. He only wanted her future, no more worrying about the past.

Her lips quirked up as she gazed up into his eyes. "Sin-eater, you're covered in blood." Her fingers plucked his shirt from his chest, where it had been plastered.

He threw back his head and let out a belly-deep chuckle.

"It suits you well." She smiled widely.

He kissed that smile right off her face, devouring her until she was melted against him, their bodies molding to the other's, power swirling around them and binding them as one.

They'd been designed to be exactly suited, their power recognizing each other's, building off one another like a perfect crescendo of ringing notes.

He spun her back to his side, facing down the crowd, a surety in his gut that this was his next step. All his life he'd been trapped in choices not of his own making. Today, he was making a choice, and he would free them both.

"I am claiming Amara, Princess of the Sixth, Sarratum of Asurim as my royal consort," he yelled over the din of the faceless crowd, ignoring the murmuring at their display of affection.

Silence fell over the room at once. Every shuffling foot echoed. Leira's shriek of rage silenced as suddenly as it started.

Mara’s gasp rang through the room.

Cass spared her a brief glance; her face had gone pale as parchment.

He was doing this for *them.*

“She is to be my wife.” He tightened his grip on her hand when she tried pulling away. “Future Queen of the Hells. Anyone wishing to contest this had best speak now.” He would obliterate them on the spot, but he would consider their opinion noted.

“Cass,” she hissed. “Don’t do this.”

“I have to Mara,” he whispered back. “We need to do this. To move forward. You. Are. Mine.”

Anger swirled in his gut. She had kept so much from him, but she couldn’t deny that they were right. They fit. Like they were designed for one another.

“I have something to say about that.” A voice echoed down the hall, preceding a looming cloaked figure.

Mara’s struggles to free her grasp grew desperate, Jez stepped up to Cass’s right side, Az ran to stand at the bottom of the dais. Levistus had moved to Leira’s side, holding his arms out to block her. Cass wasn’t sure if he was protecting her or stopping her from lashing out.

If it hadn’t been for the gentle swell of her belly serving as reminder, Cass would’ve killed her himself by now.

The robed creature stopped in front of Azadiel, pulling on the ethers until it formed into corporeality. Its darkness flooded the room, its power recognizable because of Cass’s own dealings with the old gods. It called to some part of him.

Mara stopped struggling, clinging to Cass. He wrapped his arm over her shoulder, trying to ease her. He was King in this realm, his power immutable, even the old gods tread lightly here.

“Namtar,” Mara moaned softly.

“What right do you have to enter my realms?” Cass notched his chin and narrowed his eyes.

“By right of my promised bride.” Namtar’s eyes slid over to Leira, then back to Amara, his hand extended. “You cannot claim what is promised to me, son of Asmodeus.”

Cass bared his teeth. Anger surged through him. Namtar had no claim, not by Mara’s choice. He held her tighter when he felt her balance shift into him, glancing down with concern, a pang shooting through his chest

when he realized she looked afraid. Terrified. And still, her hands grasped his shirt, clinging to him as though he were going somewhere.

“She’s mine,” Cass snarled. “She was mine first. You have no claims here, your defunct powers wane, old one. Give up and let go to the new rule.”

Namtar chuckled deeply, humorlessly. “By the ether, you are as arrogant as you are dim-witted. Boy, I am a god of death and disease. I do not need worship to feed my power.”

He held up his hand and beckoned with a finger. “Fear and pain are an ongoing tribute and my right. As long as mortals live, they die.”

Cass watched Leira step out from her brother’s protective embrace, around Levistus’s blocking one and walk straight toward Namtar, as though she couldn’t help herself.

A trickle of sweat ran down his temple, Mara wasn’t even breathing, her body rigid in his arms.

Leira stumbled to Namtar’s side, her head shaking her hands held up, but her feet moving regardless of her wishes.

“I can take everything from you.” Namtar ran his hand down Leira’s spine, her body curling into itself, trying to cringe away from his touch.

“Don’t touch her again.” Cass snarled, his heart picking up speed. His daughter—he’d thought her protected…

A scream tore from Leira’s throat, her arms wrapping around her middle as she dropped to her knees, her agonized wails echoing off the walls as everyone looked on in horror.

Everyone except Namtar, who’s luminous gaze remained upon Cassius with a self-satisfied grin on his gods-hewn face.

Cass watched the blood pool around Leira’s feet, his mind failing to register what he was seeing. His body did. His knees lost strength, Mara cried out in surprise, grasping at his arm, trying to keep him on his feet. He dropped anyway.

At one point, he hadn’t even fucking wanted it.

By all the gods, he did now. *His daughter*.

His body burned, then went cold.

Why had he not realized how much he wanted to hold his fucking daughter? He was supposed to protect her.

A high-pitched buzzing drilled through his ears, drowning out the surrounding sound. Mara shook his shoulder, and he took in a sharp breath,

clearing up the white patches in his vision.

He'd failed to protect her. Again, he hadn't been strong enough.

"I wonder how much more I can take from you? How much would it take to break the Demon King?" Namtar kept walking forward, all the attention now on Leira, who was sprawled out on the floor in a pool of her own blood.

Not only hers.

Cass felt tears burning tracks down his cheeks.

He wasn't losing one more damned thing.

He looked up to Mara, reaching for her hand. It was cold and clammy, trembling, but she still gripped his hard.

He had her. That's all he needed. Together they were everything.

"Don't Cass. Don't say it," Mara was mumbling softly.

Namtar reached into his pocket, pulling out a scrap of silk, fingering it gently, watching Cass.

He tried keeping his expression neutral; the rage was taking over, the void inside of him swallowing him…

"Perhaps you might've even made a good father. Might have raised a daughter of strength, one shining with the light of the old ones." Namtar looked back over his shoulder, eyeing Leira with a dispassionate expression before turning back to Cass. "You could've dressed her in silk and ribbons of pink."

He let the scrap of fabric drop, Cass's hands reaching out to grasp it without thought. His hands knew this silk. It was tattered and fragile now, but he had such a tangible, tactile memory of the feeling of it.

Secreted away in his pocket. Reassuring. Even when she couldn't be with him, he had this part of her.

Memories flooded him. Every feeling he'd ever had for her filling him, his chest expanding with the onslaught. His heart hurting with the abundance of emotion.

He looked up at her. Her face was chalk white, pupils blown so large they ate up the color of her eyes, her head shaking as she backed away, one unsteady step at a time.

He had — *loved* — her. Unselfishly. Wholeheartedly. With all the passion of the young and unencumbered.

An emotion that had always teased his senses, taunted him with his objective understanding and inability to experience.

“No,” she moaned. “Don’t say it. Please, Cass.”

Because he HAD experienced it. He’d given his heart to her — been chasing down that feeling ever since, consciously or not…

“Too late, little one.” Namtar reached for her. “It counts.”

Cass bellowed out a roar as the walls on his memory crashed down hard.

Everything came back.

The world went white.

102

RIBBONS THAT BIND

“CASS! Look at me…”

He didn’t. Instead, his eyes went blank, leaving Amara to stare into an expressionless gaze. Fear clawed through her, her mind rushing through an arsenal of spells she could cast, debts she was owed and gods she could bargain with, knowing none would be able to save him. His mind was breaking, and with it, his body would follow.

She held him close, her lips by his ear as she whispered only for him to hear, “sarrum-shi, my demon, my heart. If there is anything of you in there still, help the sin-eater and fight your way back.”

Her plea was answered with agonized groans and pain filled gasps, his muscles spasming with convulsions, his heartbeat becoming too erratic, leaving her to the fear his body would give out at any moment. And when his mouth opened to scream, no sound came forth, instead, it was her cry that tore through the hall.

Suddenly Jez was at her side, the angel wasting no time wrapping his arms around Cassius’s torso, restraining the demon’s convulsing body before he could hurt himself, or her.

“Amara? What’s happening to him?”

“He remembered. His soul...”

She could hear the defeat in her own voice, regret burning a dark hole into her soul. Had she been strong, she would’ve forced him to drink the forgetting potion rather than leaving the choice to him.

“Have I broken you yet, Priestess?” Namtar’s voice was taunting, victory evident in his tone.

Bile rose in her throat with the memory of all she had lost through his petulance. Her fingers clenched into the fabric Cassius’s shirt. She’d given everything, only to spend her final moments watching the sin-eater die. He wasn’t her husband, yet the pain of the loss was the very same.

“Amara, don’t believe for one moment this defunct god has the power to remove the King of the Hells.” Levistus’s face had turned ashen.

Namtar’s gaze cut to Levistus, he radiated smugness. He knew something… “A King who refuses to acknowledge his full power?”

Her voice cut through his gloating. “You’ll make many powerful enemies among the ancient ones trapped within the ether, his family will avenge him. You already saw one of their blood murdered, are you sure you wish to incite Inanna’s wrath any further?”

His decayed smile was slowly revealed from beneath the fabric of his dark hood. “Once I claim your soul for my own, I won’t need to fear the fade, or Inanna. No god will be my equal, I shall rule the ether in which they are forced to exist.”

Her gaze moved over the demon, greedily drinking in the sight of him a final time, finding the ribbon of pink clenched ever so tightly within his grip. The last she had seen that ribbon…

> Upon this day our hands we bind
> A symbol of our hearts entwined
> Our hands, our hearts, our spirits bound
> I offer to you my body to join with yours as one
> I give to you my soul to keep until our lives are done.

Long fingers had ever so carefully knotted the ends of the ribbons together. His cheeks had been slightly flushed when he turned away from her, peeking back as his hands worked out of her sight. When he turned back around, he robbed her of breath. *The ribbon from her dress.* All that remained of her pink gown, the only memento of her sisters, and her first memory of her demon. It was the perfect symbol for the beginning of their new life.

“I give you my soul ‘til our lives are done.”

Their words had resonated through the dungeon hall as Cassius twined the ribbon into their cord, one of six symbolizing their promises to one another, binding their union.

“YOU POX-RIDDEN FUCKWEASEL!”

Rage exploded through her as she broke free from the thrall of memory, only to find Namtar standing before her, his head tilted down to gaze upon her and the demon she held cradled in her arms.

“You triggered him.”

Her magick lashed out, its power far beyond her control as something within her became unleashed. Magick coiled in angry spirals, tearing through the death god’s defenses to latch on, hauling a shocked Namtar up into the air like a rag doll. Then the coils sprung, hurling him off into the distance, as far away as possible from the demon in her arms.

She hastily summoned forth a protection circle, its barrier warding their small group. Aza, Levistus, and Jez stood to cover, swords drawn, hellfire blazing from their blades.

As if unaffected by her attack, the god reformed to stand before Azadiel, with only the barrier of her circle to separate them. Azadiel’s sword was raised in warning, and to Amara’s horror, she noted Namtar’s own skeletal fingers close around the hilt of a familiar sword.

Her sword.

The Sumerian god of death and pestilence was wielding the Sword of Divine Justice. The implications alone were staggering.

Behind the protection of Namtar’s back she could make two figures standing among the soldiers swarming the hall, leaving little doubt as to who had acted as his accomplice. Leira was hiding in place behind her brother’s back, while Basileus tightly clasped Glasya’s broken body to his chest. Her gaze wandered over it all, captured by the shallow pool of blood at Leira’s feet.

Again rage surged, again her magick lashed out, dark tendrils not targeting the three whose scheming had led to this tragedy. Instead, they ensnared the god whose cruelty again had claimed the life an innocent, for no other reason than to break her demon, to break her.

Dark vines sprouted up from basalt stones to bind his corporeal form, rooting Namtar to the Nessus. There would be no victory today, but there

would have vengeance for Odette.

“You had NO RIGHT to claim the child’s life, the curse was not called forth.”

“Once again you blame me for actions not my own. It was poison that claimed the life of the princess inside her mother’s womb, it was her death which offered me passage into the Nessus.”

“WHO?” She shrieked with fury. Even as she demanded an answer, a nauseating suspicion was settling in her gut.

“Do you really need to ask?”

Poison. Had Leira not used poison before? Her eyes moved to find the Erinyes.

“You guessed wrong, priestess.”

Instinct rather than logic guided her, and her gaze moved to the broken woman held in Basileus’s arms.

“Yes…”

Amara went cold, holding her demon impossibly tight as the truth sunk in. It had been her mother who summoned Namtar to the Nessus to kill Cassius, and she’d murdered his unborn daughter to do it.

Her power wouldn’t hold him for much longer. “Jez?”

When she had his attention, she wordlessly surrendered Cassius over, then reached for her athame.

“You still think to defeat me, priestess? Your tenacity has already killed everyone you care about—or are you inviting me to take the three who are left standing?”

A steady stream of crimson spilled from her palm as she slid the wickedly sharp blade across her own flesh. No matter how much she despised her lineage, her blood was of the Hells as much as it was of Asurim. She’d never called upon the Nessus for other reason than to feed its power, until now...

Rise corruption, chaos summons you.

Come avenge your fallen king and heir.

Her blood boiled and bubbled, a sentient power awakening as the Nessus answered. It filled her, claiming from her memory and her soul, demanding its King, only to find him dying.

The soldiers and warriors who stood in the hall fled in panic when basalt rock began to quake, and the ground beneath their feet broke apart. The darkness she commanded held Namtar bound in place, while Hell

itself rose to lay claim to Death God. She may be imagining it, but for the briefest of moments she swore that eerie luminescence of his eyes dimmed with fear.

By the merging of fire and darkness the ancients will fall

The prophecy spoke of such a union, could it have been referring to the merging of dark magick and the fire of Hell? Could they possibly defeat a god?

That split second of hope crumbled when the power of the Nessus grew too volatile for her to control. If she lost her hold, then she would unleash immeasurable power, the chasm of darkness and fire would rip apart the entirety of the Nessus, and possibly the Hells.

Without Cassius to command it, she was left with no choice but to release her hold on both the infernal energy and her own magick, removing herself as their conductor. And that was all the advantage Namtar needed to break free. His own power flooded the hall, its oppressive energy pushing against her barrier.

“My patience is at an end, surrender your soul now or I’ll claim those of all present.”

“Not a fucking chance,” Jez roared from her side before she had a chance to respond.

The Herald drew his sword and lunged for him, shock evident on his expression when rather than breaking through the protection of her barrier, he slammed directly into it as if having struck a solid wall.

“Jez, stand down.” She could hear the odd tone of her own voice, then recognized it for what it was, acceptance. *Defeat*.

“Your ego is nearly as great as hers, Lord Herald of the Hells, if you believe yourself capable of striking down a god. Do you still fail to comprehend the truth? Her barriers could never keep me out, and she knows this well. Why then did she summon them?”

“Amara?” Aza’s stricken gaze met hers. “Don’t do it, child. There has to be another way.”

“I searched for one Aza…”

His gaze bore into hers. “Did you find one?”

Silence was her answer. *Had she?* Even she wasn’t sure anymore.

Despite the hopelessness of the situation, her lips curved into a smile. Aza never had underestimated her, even now he believed she’d have a trick

up her sleeve that would save the day. She wasn't a savior; she hadn't even been able to save the one being she loved. Not this time.

Her voice was low enough where only he would hear her. "The crystal goes to the highest bidder Aza, you know the price we seek for it."

"Is that what that was about? Mara don't—"

"Quiet now teacher. What was done cannot be unmade."

For all his faults in the past, even she had to acknowledge Azadiel to be a mastermind of strategy and negotiations, he would successfully bargain the crystal and save the sin-eater. The soul of a priestess in exchange for the life of a demon. He offered salvation from the fade, the gods surely wouldn't hesitate this time to strike a deal.

Ignoring Namtar's impatience, Amara pulled Cassius back into her lap, letting her fingers brush through the sweat-slick strands of his hair one final time, burning the feel of it to memory. He was still convulsing, but the contractions had eased in intensity. He was fighting to survive a four-hundred-year-old injury, clinging to life.

"Please Aza, Jez... look after him, and don't let him do anything too stupid when he wakes."

Her free hand moved to find the crystal he wore around his neck, tucking it carefully beneath his shirt. "Demon, I have to go now..."

Her lips brushed over his damp forehead, the intensity of loss overwhelming.

When she stood, a hand closed firmly around her upper arm.

"I can still take that hand of yours, old man, let go."

Her threat had lost its bite, perhaps because she'd not managed to say it with more conviction than a whisper.

"Amara… I won't let you do this," Levistus said coldly.

"What makes you think you get a say in this?"

"Amara you need to know—" Levistus's head dropped, his voice breaking, "that is to say… I suspect…"

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a portal flaring to life, with familiar forms spilling out. Her Dominae appeared in full battle regalia, followed by a small militia of warriors led by Andromeda herself. They couldn't save her, but the sight of them gave her the closure she hadn't realized she needed. Her people had come here this time, they hadn't forsaken her.

When she nearly crossed the barrier to reach for Namtar's hand, she was roughly pulled back, with Jez and Aza moving to stand before her, both facing off with the Death God, with only her barrier standing between them.

"Sarratum!"

Berith and Malachi were the first to clear the way through the ruined throne room, coming to a stop at the sight of the scene before them.

"HIGHNESS, NO!"

As if time itself slowed, she looked on as Namtar extended his arm, his palm coming to rest upon the barrier of her circle. Her magick fizzled angrily, burning away at the bits of rotting flesh which clung stubbornly to his decaying form.

With a sudden blast, none had been ready for, Namtar unleashed his power against the barrier, its forceful recoil slamming all onto the ground as Amara's circle shattered apart. All but Mara, who was held upright by Namtar's punishing grip around her throat.

"Checkmate, Amara."

She felt something latch deep inside of her, her sight fading to black as a white-hot pain ripped through her. It was familiar; she'd felt it before on the night her demon died, the agony the body felt as the soul was slowly ripped away. It was a good thing she had no air to breathe, she would surely only have wasted it by screaming. And she didn't want to scream, she wanted to smile because as her head lolled to the side and her gaze searched for her demon a final time; she found eyes the color of burning amber staring back at her.

Cassius

Something lurched inside, and she recognized the pull of the crystal.

"What did you do? You fucking bitch!"

Final awareness was her demon's voice screaming out her name, drowned out by Namtar's agonized shrieking, and the loud crunch of her neck as Namtar's grip tightened.

Death's infamous runaway bride had been caught at last.

103

NOT EVEN DEATH WILL PART

-Four hundred and thirty years ago, within the maze of the Malsheem-

THEY WERE GOING TO THE WRONG PLACE. THAT'S ALL HIS MIND COULD fixate on. This wasn't where he'd always come to visit her. His father led them down a warren-like maze of hallways, but not down to the dungeon, not the way Cass had always traveled. Where had his father put her?

His body was in unimaginable pain. Bas held most of his weight, Cass's arm thrown over the other demon's shoulder, each step they took sending a jarring flash of new pain bursting through his body.

The anxiety rioting through him drowned the thrill of finally being able to see Mara again — his already upset stomach was churning.

After their attempt at escape, his father had been furious. What if she were no longer alive, and this was a set-up to have Cass believing in some hope again? It would be exactly the type of punishment his father would find enjoyable.

When they finally started descending, they were in a part of the fortress Cass was completely unfamiliar with and his brain was so muddled he wasn't sure if he'd remember the way back.

Cass fought to wake his damn brain up, he had a feeling he would need his wits sharp.

He wouldn't be able to find her.

His father actually intended for him to never see her again.

Panic flooded his chest, his breaths quickening, the stabbing pain coming more frequently as his broken ribs jarred with every movement of his lungs.

He was tossed onto the floor of a cell.

Mara hissed in a breath, her eyes wild as she met his.

Elation filled his chest at the sight of her, alive. Mostly healthy. They could get through this, they would live to fight another day.

As long as they had each other, that was all they needed in order to survive.

His relief that she was still alive was short-lived. Each of her arms was held by one of his father's foot soldiers and her lip bled where she'd obviously been struck.

He rolled onto his hands and knees, gasping for a breath, then struggled to his feet, bracing his hand against the wall when an intense wave of dizziness swamped him.

"You… won't." He couldn't catch his breath, his lungs felt too heavy to rise. "Touch… her… again," he panted, sweat pouring down his face.

He swiped at it, catching the blood covering his hand out of the corner of his eyes. He was bleeding from somewhere. Or — everywhere.

"You betrayed me, Cassius. For her?" His father turned to him, his eyes shining far too bright. "Your father. Your king and *your god*—for a *warlock*?" He sauntered to Amara as he spoke, watching Cass's reaction.

He tried not to let it show. He didn't want his father to see how distressed he was at the thought of him putting his hands on her. His body couldn't even move to fight for her.

"I warned you to stay away from her." Asmodeus stroked a finger down her cheek and Cass's heart nearly exploded from his chest. "You've disobeyed me for the last time."

His throat dried, tears burning the backs of his eyes. He fought it. They'd made it this far, they were still alive. She was still his. If his father broke them today, they would heal, he'd healed from worse.

"She is *mine*," he said through the hoarseness in his throat. "She's my wife." He flinched when his father jumped at him.

"We bound our lives and our souls, death won't even part us. I'll always come for her. She'll always come first. Is that what you're so afraid of?" he spat out, with far more bravado than he felt.

Just get it over with, old man, so they could heal and move on. Worrying about what his father would do was far worse.

Mara made a noise in her throat, a small squeak of fear, drawing Cass's attention. She wasn't afraid of much.

His father's guard had her by the hair, forcing her head in Cass's direction. Enough of a tell that Cass braced for the hit he knew damned well was coming.

"Leave him be," Mara sputtered, coughing. "I placed a spell on him, it was all my doing. He doesn't understand what he's saying," she was shouting, panic clear.

He met his father's eyes, and Cass knew her argument was discarded. His father knew.

He let out a grunt when his father's hand wrapped around his neck and shoved him to the wall, his feet no longer touching the ground, his father's power surrounding him until movement was impossible.

"Perhaps I went about this the wrong way." His father had gone cold, expressionless. Dread settled into his gut as swiftly as a fist. "If you insist on returning to her, as you say, then we'll have to make it so she'll never have you."

The '*we*' wasn't a slip of the tongue. Cass knew his father better than that. Every word he spoke was well thought out and carefully placed for impact.

His father dropped him to the ground as though he were to refuse that no longer deserved consideration, then his eyes flashed and Cass's body went stiff in preparation.

And nothing could've prepared him for the agony. His father's boot came down heavily on his back, and Cass heard the snap of bone before the pain spiraled through his body in an agonizing crescendo. A climax of all the pain leading up to that…

"Caaass!" Mara screamed, her voice sounding distant. Beyond the droning throb in his head.

He looked over to her, reaching out, trying to reassure her. They would heal. They would break, but they would heal. They would get through this and they would still have tomorrow. All their tomorrows.

"Cass…" Mara cried out, her voice catching. She was crying, and he couldn't do shit to comfort her.

"It's okay, Mara." He looked around his father, meeting her eyes.

“You’re so hurt. I can feel your pain.” Tears trailed down her face, her body still as the guards held her.

His father’s foot dug into his back, and Cass learned new depths to his physical agony as another wave of pain stole his breath.

“Guards,” Asmodeus called out. “Form a line behind the girl.”

Dark Gods *NO*.

Any of them. Someone had to hear his desperate prayers. His father had lost his mind. Or he was about to make Cass lose his.

“Father. *Please*. No,” his voice broke, and the disgusted look his father gave him told him just how unrelenting he was on this decision. As though Cass himself had just firmed his resolve.

Fear like he’d never felt before caused his chest to tighten, his heart pounding erratically. His body was unable to move out from under his father’s foot.

He’d promised her he’d protect her.

He’d promised her he’d be her first. Her only.

She was his, and he was hers.

A guard grabbed up her wrists and her frightened eyes came to his. She looked so confused. So lost—the guard grabbed the length of her hair and slammed her head to the ground.

“MARA,” he cried out, knowing it was futile.

“Father please, don’t do this. I’m begging you.”

The back of his father’s hand landed hard across his cheek and his eye immediately swelled shut. There was no pain anymore. His body was fighting itself, full of the urgency to get to his Mara.

“Cass?” her voice was faint, she said his name as though it were a question. She didn’t understand what his father was about to do.

“You would beg for her?” His father’s cold voice was right at his ear. “My son, my heir, would lower himself to beg for someone so unworthy? Unacceptable.”

Cass heard the tearing of fabric and nausea churned. Had to fight this…

“Why are you taking my clothes?” Mara asked, the dulcet notes of her voice clouded by fear.

“Stop this.” Cass fought to move against his father’s magick. “Father…”

The guards growled and scuffled among themselves and finally his father moved away from him, to address his men.

“Calm yourself, men, you’ll have your turn after I am done.”

Cass’s entire body went cold.

His father had done this to him only once. After he’d attacked Bas for taking him after he’d said not to. Only it had been women, his father’s concubines. He’d been forced to take all of them until he was raw and could no longer hold an erection.

It was nowhere near as violating as it would be for Mara. Her innocence—she hadn’t even had a chance to know how it was supposed to be—

“You could’ve spared her this,” Basileus’s saccharine tone whispered into his ear.

“Bas. Make him stop, please. I can’t move, please *don’t let him do this*.”

His father turned back at that, coming to a stop to look down at Cass.

“Had I realized, son, that you’d strayed so far from my teachings, I would’ve put an end to it before it reached this point.” He ran the back of his hand down Cass’s cheek, wiping the blood away on his pants. “Shame. You were finally becoming worthy.”

His father turned his head, his body still blocking Mara from his sight. Cass was light-headed, and his body felt cold as his heart raced. He was so weak… could barely move.

“No.” Cass grabbed at his father, pulling him with all the strength he had left. “Let us leave. We won’t come back. We won’t harm anyone…”

“Oh, you won’t be doing anything. You won’t run from me again.” His father crouched down to grasp his face. “Unfortunately, you won’t remember this after today. But some part of you’ll be imprinted with the memory of what I am capable of if you cross me.”

He moved out of Cass’s line of vision, and Cass’s whole body seized again as his stomach heaved, retching to no avail.

They had her pinned to the ground, her bright eyes pleading with his.

Her expression was grave, her eyes pleading with him.

“Look away, Cass,” she spoke raggedly, her words killing something inside of him. His father wouldn’t…

“There’s nothing you can do. Don’t watch,” her voice broke, her eyes squeezed shut.

“Be sure to pay attention Cassius,” Bas said as he slid Cass onto his lap, holding him up and cradling him to his chest. “Remember that what your father and these good men are about to do was wholly preventable by you. This is your own doing.”

“Don’t listen to him, Cass,” Mara spoke over Bas’s insidious whispers, “don’t you for one moment dare believe that.”

His father’s hands were on her pale hips, his mind started buzzing.

“Look away, Cass, please.” Tears shone in her eyes, her face flushed red with shame.

Bas pinned him to his chest as he whispered in his ear and held Cass’s face turned toward what his father was doing.

“You’ll watch, Cassius. I’ve been ordered to snap a bone every time you flinch.” Bas’s silky tone carried into his ear.

“Please. He’s not even prepared her—he’s going to *hurt* her…” Tears streamed unchecked. For her.

Their eyes locked, hers pleading with his. How could he *not* blame himself?

There was one thing he could do for her, to make this easier…

He would hate himself forever for it.

He mouthed the words ‘forgive me’ to her and prayed to whatever dark god was listening to end this. *Just end them,* instead of this suffering.

His stomach heaved again. He would be causing her to lust for his own father. His Mara.

She whimpered as his father’s hands gripped her hips and dragged her across the floor, her eyes terrified as they met his. Of course she wouldn’t understand. Everything they’d ever done had been intimate. Sacred. Not his twisted blasphemy of lust.

He let his power seep out.

Lust pervaded the room, Bas groaned in his ear, Mara whimpered, a dawning recognition shining in her eyes before they glazed over with it.

“You want it to be you?” Bas kissed under his ear, across his jaw, sloppily meeting his lips. He did. More than anything, he wanted her. Not like this.

Bas snarled, “you want this. Look. Your father is helping himself to what’s yours.”

Her screams of pain shattered him. Broke what was left of the flickering hope that had managed to survive up until this point.

His eyes were taking in the sight of his father between her thighs.

His mind fought against it.

“She wants this, and that’s your doing as well,” Bas kept whispering, “she’ll remember this night always, and remember that you made her crave this.”

He could get through this. She would still be alive. He would heal, he would help her heal. They would survive and fight another day.

Just had to get through this.

Some part of his mind registered Bas fondling him, he wasn’t even sure he could get erect. If he would ever be able to again. The lust in the room wasn’t right, it wasn’t the nourishing kind. This wasn’t about sex.

He couldn’t look away. Bas was seeing to that. His body couldn’t move, his father saw to that. Instead, he just went blank. Nothing registered. Like he wasn’t inside of his own body.

The pain combined with his father’s hands on Mara’s pale thighs had finally snapped his sanity.

Her screams coming from somewhere else.

Not his Mara.

He’d never allow her to be in such pain…

His father wiped himself clean on her discarded shirt, and the sight of her blood shattered something inside of him.

His father had broken him. Successfully.

Because he broke her.

The powers of the Hells flooded his body, the hell-flames burst to life around him, Bas jumped away screaming.

It was like he was observing it all from somewhere else.

Then he was pinned to place, every limb unmovable, his father looming over him, snapping his mind back. The grunts and groans echoing through the room causing the bile to climb back up his throat, even as it closed off.

“That’s one trick I hope you never relearn.” Asmodeus’s eyes shone so brightly they nearly glowed, wings of flame surrounding his head like a warped version of a halo. “Belial can keep his flames where they belong.”

He wouldn’t look. Didn’t want to see them violating his precious Mara. Her sweet innocence and curiosity about everything they’d shared—was just shattered.

“I’m going to pin my sword in your throat, then I’ll cut off your cock with my decorative dagger,” Cass snarled out, weakly fighting against the force holding him still.

She’d never get that back. Never be able to look at what they shared as a sacred act again.

Asmodeus shook his head, tsking under his breath. “Now, son. That’s not very nice.”

He knelt next to Cass, placed his palm over his forehead, and looked back over his shoulder.

Mara. He had to get her out of here. Save her. Heal her…

She was his. He was hers. He’d do anything. Whatever was needed to make this okay.

His father would die painfully for his transgressions…

“Watch carefully, little warlock. Today the Cassius you know dies. You’ll always remember what it means to cross me.”

Mara didn’t make a sound. She wasn’t even crying anymore.

“Whereas, he will not.” His father looked down at him, a brief flash of regret in his eyes floating up from the shimmer of insanity that was so clearly marked there.

A blinding flash of light burst behind his eyes, followed by a searing pain that burned through every synapse, traveled down every nerve ending. He’d thought he’d been in pain before? He’d known nothing.

He heard the echoes of his own screams, couldn’t stop himself. His body was convulsing, no longer his to control. Every muscle seized, tugging his broken bones further out of place, his head felt like a series of explosions were dancing around, everything that made him who he was getting eaten by slow molten flame.

And then there was nothing but the void.

104

A THOUSAND TIMES OVER

AWAKE. AWARE.

His father had stolen everything. What amounted to his soul. Destroyed everything. Gotten away with everything.

His body was uninjured. The memory of the pain lingered, the stiffness from bracing himself for impact. Nausea… from watching… remembering…

Mara.

His eyes opened in a panic, his body roaring with adrenaline. Namtar. Here.

Right in his line of vision. Keeping Mara from reaching him—her hand reached for his—his instinctively reaching back.

She was his to save. How many times would he fail in that?

That decrepit fucker wasn't. Letting. Her. Go.

He met Mara's resigned gaze; she wasn't even trying to break free of Namtar's hold—then she smiled at him.

A sob escaped, his chest heaving, his elbows fighting against — he looked back to see who had him pinned — Levistus's hold.

The crunch of her neck sounded off into his ears like a shock-wave. His heart… might've exploded.

With a bellow of rage, he threw off Levistus's hands, lunging for the death god — *too late* —

His vision dimmed, his head fell back, and an agonized roar was torn from the very depths of his soul, power burst from him, his wings erupting

from his back.

He saw nothing.

There was nothing left.

He ripped open a hell-gate with no thought but one.

Vengeance.

He would right every wrong that was done to them, then he would join her. There was NOTHING left for him here.

His Mara, his daughter… his future—nothing.

His father had time to jump to his feet and hold up his hands before Cass barreled into him, throwing him up against the wall, his hand covering his face and slamming his head back.

“You thought I’d not ever remember?” Cass roared, spittle flying from his mouth.

His fist met the flesh of this father’s face. He’d like to think it was the most gratifying thing he’d ever felt, but he was lost to the grips of rage so fierce he wasn’t sure he’d ever claw his way back to sanity.

“I’ll kill you a thousand times over for what you’ve done to us.” Another punch, blood spraying across Cass’s face. “And for what you did to her, I’ll make you suffer.”

His hand closed around his father’s throat, tightening, pinning his father down with the weight of his body. He wasn’t fighting back. Cass didn’t notice.

“Cassius! Stop!” His father shouted, grasping his shoulders and throwing him to his back and pinning him down.

“I did it for your own good.” His father’s glowing blue eyes were full of concern. Cass saw the calculation behind it. His father never concerned himself with sentiment. “Glasya made a deal with Namtar when she conceived the girl. ANY love you had developed for her would have KILLED YOU,” Asmodeus was shouting in his face.

“You lie!” Cass roared. “You forged us into weapons to be wielded at a time of your choosing and we weren’t playing along like the good little pawns we were created to be.”

“He is DEATH,” his father roared back. “He would have killed you.”

Cass sobbed again, fighting against his father’s weight and hold. “He killed HER. My Mara. He KILLED MY DAUGHTER,” Cass yelled back, right in his face.

His father's grasp loosened enough that Cass managed to get an arm free, his fist meeting his father's throat, eliciting a roar as Asmodeus's own wings flared to life, the flame of them a cacophonous roar.

"And I hope Glasya recovers enough that I can make her suffer for a fucking eternity," he added, not wanting to see ANY concern on his father's face.

"What did you do to my daughter?" Asmodeus's voice went quiet and cold.

Cass bared his teeth, a mockery of a smile, the emotions tearing through him making it difficult to pull up any semblance of glee.

"Mara gulleted her from navel to neck," Cass spoke back with his own tone just as deadened as his father's. "Pulled out her still-beating heart. We'll send you the pictures."

Before he could even finish speaking, his father had dragged him to his feet and thrown him against the wall, following through with his elbow, smashing it against Cass's face with a cracking burst of pain.

The pain was nothing. There was no pain greater than remembering every way he'd failed her.

He spat a mouthful of blood and sneered. "Do it. You took everything. Namtar took the rest. JUST FUCKING END IT."

He threw a fist, and it landed against his father's mouth, his knuckles shredded by teeth. Asmodeus caught his shoulders, and with another slam back, Cass's ears were ringing, his vision dimmed out for a moment, flashes of light blurring the world around him.

His knees went watery, and he dropped to them, only to be knocked back when a solid bar landed across his ribs. His breath whooshed out, blood spraying from his mouth as he hacked and coughed.

The bar came back again, landing across his neck and collarbone and even the ragged breaths he was dragging in were gone.

"I should've left you with your mother, you sniveling whelp," his father was yelling.

Cass swallowed convulsively, scrambling for something…

He called up the hell-flames—and nothing.

Nothing. He had nothing.

His father laughed, loud and abrasive. "You can't call up the Hells here, boy. Give over. We're nowhere near the source of your power."

Cass let out another agonized howl and jumped at his father, his hands wrapping around his throat, his thumbs digging into his trachea.

His hands were as much of a mangled mess as Asmodeus's face, his knuckles had been shredded against teeth, possibly bones. He couldn't stop. Something inside of him, something dark and growing, had taken over.

He was going to finish him.

Finally.

His father's hands tugged at his arms, futilely and growing weaker.

Crackling, wheezing noises were coming from him, Cass couldn't see for all the blood running into his eyes—

White light filled the room in a flash, so bright that for a moment, Cass thought something burst in his brain. This was it then?

Something grasped up the back of his shirt, hauling him off his father and on to the tips of his toes.

Archangel. A powerful one, judging by the brightness he was emanating.

"You'll not end the existence of Asmodeus this day, young… king." He hesitated over the title long enough for Cass to grasp the intended insult. "You are banished from here. Your time is finite. Begone."

Cass was tossed through a celestial portal that was akin to being skinned alive, the opposite of his hell-gates, the holy flames that tore it through the realms shredding his body further.

He landed back in his throne room with a wet thunk, his body in an unmoving heap.

Shouting. So much shouting and scrambling—

He felt the power throbbing through him, tasted the hints of dark magicks on the air. Warlock magick.

Mara?

He slowly opened his eyes and met Jez's concerned ones. Mephistopheles stood beside him, Az was on his knees and cupping Cass's face.

"Cass?" Az's voice was hushed, full of emotion, reflected in his eyes. "Cass, stay with us—are you coherent? Jez, call for some bandages or something, by the Hells he looks as though he was run through a cheese grater."

“She’s gone. Az she’s really gone,” Cass tried to make his voice work, “she left me. She promised she’d never leave me. I promised her I’d be back.”

He hiccuped, belatedly realizing he was crying.

No reason to stay. She wasn’t coming back this time—

“Listen to me.” Az held his face, looking him dead in the eye. “Look at me Cass. Stop drifting out, I need you to stay with me.”

He nodded slowly, each breath he took an agonizing reminder he was here, and she wasn’t. He was here with nothing left to live for. He was here… and didn’t want to be.

“End it, Az. Please,” Cass whispered. “Please. Just do it, I can’t… I don’t have anything…”

“Don’t you ever fucking talk like that again.” Jez was there, growling at him. “Jesus, Az, I can feel his pain—is there nothing we can give him?”

“Pfft.” Cass sniffed and pulled his face out of Az’s hands. If he wasn’t going to do it… he rolled onto his belly and got his knees up under him, then his elbows… then had to stop and gasp for air. He inched toward her body—his Mara—he would be with her, even if it was just the shells of who they were.

He could almost reach her… Hells every movement hurt, his bones were shattered in so many places, his skin seared away, none of it comparable to the agony eroding his insides at the sight of her, pale and still and broken.

“Cassius, you stop moving and listen to me now.” Az spoke, power laced through his order, and Cass froze in place.

Then Mephistopheles plucked up the amulet around his neck, tearing it off him—it was all he had left… Cass cried out, still unable to free himself from Az’s binding words.

Mephistopheles dangled it in front of his face, Cass felt the tears dripping from the end of his nose and off his chin.

“This is her spirit crystal,” Mephistopheles said, deadly intent in his gaze. “Her soul is in this stone. You can summon her back. You two are linked.” He tapped on Cass’s chest, right where her sigil was.

It was so cold…

“Call her from it, Cass. You can do this, I know you can,” Az whispered urgently.

In a blink, he could move again, and Mephistopheles was pressing the amulet into his palm and Cass snatched the dagger from Az's belt.

He ripped open his shirt, and with a grunt, started digging the blade around the outline of her sigil. Right to the source. Her essence was still there. She still lived on in him, no matter how minute…

"Stop!" Az shouted as Jez grabbed for his hand.

Cass growled and called up the hell-flames, and they came to heel like a well-trained hound, circling him and Mara, blocking everyone else out.

He continued to trace the sigil with the dagger, blood running down his chest, coating the already raw skin.

With words dragged from the pit of his soul, a fervent prayer to any god who was listening, he called for her.

Come out of the dark, my Mara. Come back.

"Please," He whispered, the word raw with centuries of repressed anguish. "Come back to me."

He waited. Then laid himself down and curled into the center of his circle, wrapping himself around her, willing himself to die. Nothing left… he was done. But still, he waited.

A shriek split through his head.

Then he heard her gasping breaths.

Then he smelled her.

Heard her heartbeat.

His Mara.

Her beautiful eyes locked on to his, her fury matching his own.

His hand shot out and grasped her hair—he didn't have the energy to move much more than that. He dragged her to his mouth, brushing a soft kiss against her lips. And another as his arms wrapped around her, as long as he held on she wouldn't disappear, he would lose his Assat.

"You're real?" He pressed a kiss to her forehead. Then her cheek, down to her jaw, up to her ear, soft, lightly sucking, his tongue darting out for a quick taste.

"Am I dead? Is it done?"

Her scent filled him with euphoria. Erased all the pain.

"My Mara. Don't leave me."

105

REKINDLED

WITH EACH MINOR MOVE OF HER HEAD, THE WORLD THREATENED TO TILT on its axis. The disruptive sound of static filled her ears, still, Amara could hear the sound of the demon's scream and that deafening snap of bone. That should've been the end of her. Then why did it feel as if she were dying, rather than dead?

"*It's yours Sarratum. We've been keeping it safe for you. Don't remove this belt, even in sleep, keep it on you always.*"

"*Why would I do that?*"

"*Because the price was paid long ago, and because my father gave me these instructions before running into those green flames.*"

Amara's hand tentatively reached for the belt she kept tied around her waist ever since that day, finding it gone. The seer had paid the price, a life sacrificed, a life spared.

"You're real?" Warm lips brushed her forehead. Then her cheek, down to her jaw, up to her ear.

How?

Perhaps she was dying, and *he* had come to collect her. If so, then she'd be dishonoring the seer's sacrifice, for where her demon went, she would follow.

"Am I dead? Is it done?"

"My Mara. Don't leave me."

Instinct had her reaching for that stubborn lock of his hair, brushing it away from his forehead. Everything in existence forgotten as soon as she

felt that familiar softness slip through her fingers. That hard to die spark of hope terrified her. Still, she needed to know, needed to hear him say it...

“Vir meus, is it you?”

“Yes, assat-shi.”

The words barely left his lips before she claimed them. Her kiss neither chaste nor passionate, carrying the heavy sorrow of her loss and the ecstasy of salvation, confessing all while baring her soul to his. Her heart felt as if it would burst out of her chest when in reality she was clasping it tightly it in her arms. It was *him.*

Defying the decree of the fates themselves, her demon had found his way back to her. She pulled back only slightly, trembling lips moving over his still.

“How?”

Cassius was holding her impossibly close, not allowing her room enough to move, barely enough to breathe. She didn’t mind, she’d simply give up breathing forever as long as he didn’t let go.

“*I give you my soul ‘til our lives shall be done.* My life wasn’t done yet, Assat, and neither was yours”

Her mind was foggy, the static in her ears making it difficult to focus as she tried to understand. “But... I saw him do it, I saw him destroy you.”

She wanted to be strong, but her words choked on a whimper at the haunting memory, her head burrowing in the crook of his neck lest he see her tears.

“You’re part of my soul, amata, as I’m part of yours. My father tried to remove by force something that was already given away willingly. Our vows bound us, you sheltered me, and justice brought us back together.”

The vows they had chosen had been romantic at the time, heartfelt.

I give you my body so two become one.

I give you my soul ‘til our lives shall be done.

Magick didn’t understand romance or emotions, only words. Her brows knitted, comprehension dawning. Together they hadn’t simply exchanged vows, they’d cast a binding. Cassius survived his father’s cruelty because his soul had already been bound to hers. Neither Namtar nor the crystal could place a claim on her soul, because she had willingly gifted it to her demon first.

The sword doesn’t cut down injustice with its blade, but purges it with its holy fire.

The not-so-useless sword had found a great injustice done, and with the cut of its blade had seen it purged. It had rekindled the flame which had been doused within the sin-eater by returning his essence to its rightful place. His soul had anchored him, saving his mind from breaking.

Could she dare to hope the nightmare had fully reached its conclusion? "Namtar?"

His hand cradled her head, easing the strain on her neck. The bone tender and sore against his touch, but not broken, her spinal cortex blessedly intact.

"No more than a fucking piece of jewelry."

When his fingers brushed along a particularly tender spot, she flinched, he hissed. "Mara, don't you ever do something that stupid again. I'll never stop being haunted by the sight of the life fading from your eyes."

She lowered her hand to his chest. "If I promise to stay out of trouble demon, then so must you." Her attempt at hiding her tears had been futile, his thumb brushed along her cheeks, gently wiping them away. "Demon, losing you killed everything worthy inside of me, don't ever make me suffer like that again."

She had meant to press her palm to her sigil, but her fingers felt only ripped fabric, and torn flesh. "What the…"

She tried to pull back further, but he continued to hold her tightly. *Too tightly*. She tried to feel, but he reached for her hands. "Demon let me see."

"It's nothing Mara, don't fret."

It was then she noticed the unhealthy pallor of his skin, the deep lines of tension around his eyes, the erratic pulse at his neck. With a swipe of her hand, she batted his hand away and pressed her palm to his chest, breaths turning to gasps when her hand became coated in warm, sticky blood.

"You're injured!"

"You *died*," he snarled back with a mulish scowl.

She tugged back, forcing him to release her, her claws making quick work shredding the remainders of his ruined shirt. Her breath hissed out slowly. The expanse of his torso was torn and cut, her sigil looking as if it'd been clawed, the bruising at his sides revealing which of his ribs had been broken. The bruises on his neck…

“Dark gods…”

She knew that injury, had seen before. It was his father’s signature.

“Foolish demon, you shouldn’t have gone to him.” Her throat was raw with the tears threatening to spill.

Strong fingers curled beneath her chin, gently guiding her gaze away from his injuries. “He needs to suffer. For what he did, for what he took.”

Bile rose up her throat, the implication of his words not lost to her, he remembered *everything*. Instinct had her shying away, her mind trying to reject those memories, but he wouldn’t let her.

“Mara.”

She couldn’t dwell on it. Not now, not ever...

“At least promise me you won’t confront him alone, Cass. This is *our* fight, and we finish it together.”

The sound of shouting rose over the static buzzing in her ears, growing steadily louder.

“I nearly succeeded. I was the stronger one, and he knew it.” Cass’s words were full of conviction and full of remorse, “But I failed. An archangel came and banished me from his prison realm before I could end his worthless life.”

More shouting, and she was growing aware of the imprint of magick permeating the hall, dark magick. Warlock magick.

“My brethren wouldn’t act unjustly, their actions are guided only with the best intentions,” Jez interjected, his voice pulling them away from the intimacy sheltering them.

Amara blinked in surprise at the sight of the herald hunkered down only a small distance away, his back turned to them, and his inky black wings fully expanded.

“Wait, have you been sitting there this entire time? And what’s with the shouting?” Her gaze moved back to Cassius who was glaring in the direction of his Herald.

“Really Jez, and you believe that your fall from grace was orchestrated with the best intentions also?”

Neither of them answered her, but she caught the flicker of fire and the glint of steel within the herald’s grip. Jez had drawn his sword.

“Cass, what’s going on?”

“It’ll be okay Mara.”

She'd forgotten Cassius shared a mental link with his herald and was clearly aware of what was transpiring. *Had Namtar escaped the crystal? Did the Celestials set Asmodeus free? Was the Demonarchy rebelling?*

She tried to scramble up, but Cassius held her back with surprising strength considering the gravity of his injuries.

"No, not okay! We need to get you out of here and have these injuries seen to… are we under attack?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it an attack, Priestess, more like a heated argument," Jez called out, his attention not straying from whatever was transpiring beyond the protection of those massive wings. "Seems your Dominae are a little upset. But don't worry, Levistus and Azadiel have everything under control."

A bright light came barreling through the air at high speed, forcing Jez to dodge at the very last second as to avoid being struck by what appeared to be an errant ball of Hexafire that whooshed right over his head.

"Well, maybe not *everything*."

From her new vantage, Amara could make out four familiar figures facing off against one another. Berith and Malachi were facing off against Levistus and Aza, dark magick and hellish steel readied for attack.

"Return our Sarratum this instant!"

She tried to call out and put an end to their attack, but her voice was drowned out by the escalating shouts and the roar of fire which filled the hall.

"We have just as much claim on her, Amara will stay in the Nessus where she can be guarded properly!" Levistus retorted, surprise halting her attempts at gaining their attention. *Claim? Guarded...* like Hell she would.

She caught another glare of green. "Jez, Hexafire incoming!"

Within the blink of the eye, his wings folded, and the privacy they'd offered the demon and herself vanished, exposing them to the chaos within the great hall.

She summoned the energy to cast a protection circle around herself and the demon, readying to give her overly enthusiastic Dominae and the old man a solid piece of her mind. She was too distracted to notice the incoming blast of energy which tore through basalt rock, its violent impact causing the ground beneath their feet to erupt.

Dust filled her lungs with every breath she took as Amara slowly peeled herself up from beneath the rock debris covering her. Black dots

clouded her vision, and that static noise which had been bothersome before turned to a persistent ringing reverberating through her head.

It took a few disoriented moments before she regained enough of her senses to check her surroundings, discovering the demon was no longer at her side.

“CASSIUS!”

Her vision doubled as soon as she tried to stand, the side of her head throbbed. Unsteadily, she found her footing, calling out for him when she was roughly pulled back, then lifted off the ground.

“Sarratum, let’s get you out of here.”

“Berith, where’s Cassius?”

He didn’t answer, instead, his arms tightened their grip as he began to move. “I have her, retreat for the portal!”

Each step jolted her as he ran for the dais, the portal to Asurim open and active behind Cassius’s throne.

“No…”

She wouldn’t leave, not without him.

“I said... NO!”

Struggling in his hold she caught sight of the demon, he was fighting, forcefully held down by both Levistus and Aza.

“CASS!”

Amber eyes locked with hers, and within his gaze, she could see her own fear reflected back. What if they’d finally been reunited, only to lose each other again?

“MARAAA!”

Bellowing her name, he freed himself of his captors, leaving Levistus with his arm bent at an odd angle while Azadiel stood hunched over in pain while gripping his side. He was coming for her.

“Berith, release me!”

He didn’t. By the time the shock of his disobedience registered, the portal was within sight. *They are purposely separating us*. Dark tendrils of magick erupted from her, whooshing outwards with the violence of a sudden tempest.

“Highness…”

The blast of power caught her Dominus off guard, forcing him to release his grip as he was hurled through the air only to slam into the rock face in the far distance.

Time slowed, as though she'd momentarily been suspended mid air before the ground came rushing up all too quickly. Shock left her unmoving, her body too sluggish to brace for impact, instead her gaze remained glued to her Dominus. She'd not really meant to harm Berith.

Rather than unforgiving rock, she struck something soft, her aching head striking a large mass of dark feathers rather than basalt. "Jez."

"Jez, give her to me!" Cassius's tone was panic-stricken.

Jez dutifully handed her over, Cass enveloping her into his embrace. Shaky fingers trailed across her cheek, then curled around her head protectively cradling it within the crook of his neck. There, despite the madness and chaos around them, her world fell into place.

He dropped to his knees, supporting her weight in a gentle embrace and called up the hell-flames to circle them protectively. The roaring blue flames dampened all the noise surrounding them, leaving the sounds of their shared breaths and pounding hearts to soothe them. Her power already latching onto his pain and siphoning it from him.

Despite the chaos surrounding them, the world was righted. For as long as she clung to him, as long as she didn't let go, he wouldn't be taken from her again.

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SO-CALLED JUSTICE

His mind flipped back to another time he'd been able to sense her fear so acutely, and the same rage filled him. Another place, another life, parallel circumstances. Circled by flames, Mara in his arms, both of them riding the fine line between fury and fear… the last time they had been surrounded this way, they'd lost everything; he'd lost her.

The hell-flames surrounding them were suddenly doused, a stern-faced Mephistopheles fighting to get past Jez. He was one of the few fallen angels who'd taught themselves the ability to wield the hell-flames, and he was using his power to act against his King.

Traitors.

He was going to have to fight; they weren't going to succeed in taking her away from him.

With the circle dropped the throne room was fully visible. All around them pandemonium had erupted, within the massive halls of his throne room bursts of Hexa-flame and Hellfire collided, their deadly sparks uncaring of who was struck in the melee. The sound of steel sliding across steel rang through the air, underscoring the angry screams and panicked shouts of both demon and warlock warriors caught in the heat of battle.

Both factions were closing in, circling tighter, her Dominae, his nobles surrounding them, their actions in clear defiance of their sovereigns' commands. She hadn't wanted to leave him, he'd seen her panic, had sensed it as keenly as he felt his own. Amara had been forced to attack her

own people to free herself and fight her way back to him. He would do no less.

He pressed his lips against her bloodied forehead with an intrinsic need to ease her distress. And at that moment Cassius made a new vow, he wouldn't let go this time, wherever destiny took them—they would go together, or not at all.

"LEAVE US BE!" Her tone was an imperial command, still, he recognized the edge of panic to her voice.

The ground beneath them reverberated with each word, his anger triggered by the sound of her fear. The tenuous hold on his power weakened, his father's legendary wrath lived within him and was running dangerously close to the surface.

Azadiel edged closer, causing Amara to stiffen in his arms. He had been their betrayer, it was because of him Asmodeus had discovered their escape. He now remembered all, and understood the price he and Amara had been made to pay for the command given by Levistus, and the choice made by Azadiel that night.

"You'll not get a second warning Az, leave us be or suffer the consequences." He hardly recognized the sound of his own voice when he snarled in the direction of their former guardian and teacher.

Their traitor.

All he wanted was to be left alone with her, to see to their injuries before burying himself inside her arms and never again resurfacing. No iron bars, no chains to separate them, no more hiding away in the darkness. Was that truly too much to ask?

"Cass," Azadiel's tone was gentle compared to the noise which nearly drowned out his words. "The Realms are in upheaval, both Hell and Asurim have fallen into chaos. News of Amara's demise and your disappearance has spread, leaving many to believe both thrones unclaimed. If we don't rein this in now, the realms will collapse, starting with the Nessus."

A movement against his chest caught his attention, his eyes lowering to find Amara busily shredding her stained shirt into ribbons before wrapping the makeshift bandages around the bleeding sigil. She pressed the wrappings tight to stifle the bleeding, yet as she did he could feel no pain. His efficient wife — even as she worked she siphoned away his agony, easing his pain while strengthening her own power.

My Mara. His eyes fell shut as a peculiar form of pride settled over him, he had been the one to teach her how to survive, and she had lived for the both of them.

“SARRATUM!”

“AMARA!”

A powerful blast of magick jolted them forward, and he opened his eyes locking on her wide ones, pain and shock radiating from their depths before he felt it sear through his torn chest, from her sigil.

“No…”

Her lips parted in surprise, her breaths gasping. His heart plummeted into his stomach when he saw the tip of a blade tear through her throat, blood pooling into her lap when the hilt was roughly yanked free from her neck. And as she slumped over, Cassius caught sight of Leira standing behind her, cornflower blue eyes wild and glazed over with the familiar sheen of corruption, madness.

His gaze followed the trajectory of the blade as it arched to strike once more, his fingers closing around the hilt of Az’s dagger even as he turned Amara’s body out of range from Leira’s frantic attack. She missed. A quick glance at Amara found her poking and probing her throat, relief flooding him when she nodded weakly.

The angle the blade had struck had narrowly missed both her aorta and her spinal cortex, an inch more and it would’ve been the same cut which had killed Dravite. The blast of magick which had slammed into them hadn’t been intended as an attack but had likely saved her life.

“CASSIUS!” Jez’s panic-stricken voice jolted him out of shock, just as hot steel seared his flesh, the sharpened blade of a sword cleaving through his right shoulder.

“Basileus.”

The pain felt so familiar. *The Sword*. The Sword of so-called Divine Justice, that twice-damned piece of junk, it failed them when they needed it most. For a second time, its blade sunk into his flesh, severing tendons, separating his shoulder at the joint. Amara moved at his side, could feel the anger burn a path through her, the same fire burned brightly within him.

Obeying years of battle training, he didn’t allow instinct to pull him away from the attack. Rather than defend, Cassius attacked as soon as the sword withdrew from his flesh.

He held the decorative dagger within his left hand, thankfully his stronger — his form already spinning into Basileus to block his next swing with sheer strength alone, and a bit of dirty fighting he'd picked up in the pits.

His right fist swung out wildly, but landed true, catching Basileus off-guard, the other demon's head snapping back as fist met jaw, sending a spray of blood over his face and eyes, but he heard the sword drop leaving Bas wide open for attack.

Wielding the dagger took more effort than anticipated, his strength waning fast, his shoulder was bleeding profusely, sapping what was left. A scream came from his side, female, but he couldn't spare a glance to check on Mara. As difficult as it was not to let his eyes wander to her, had to stay focused. He had to kill Basileus for what he had done. To her... to him.

The sword swung upwards in an arc, its blade dark and tarnished like the demon wielding it. Cass ducked out of the way, the sword slipping through what was left of his shirt, burning a trail across the flesh of his ribs. He stepped into it, stabbing at Bas with the pitiful blade. The dagger sunk into the soft flesh under Bas's sternum, Bas grabbing Cass's hand that held the hilt and squeezing, the pressure causing the tendons to groan. He had no choice but to let it go.

Bas pulled back his arm to get leverage to press the tip of the sword over Cass's heart, Cass pulled Bas closer, preventing him from being able to use the sword. The surrounding ground rumbled once more, the Nessus reacting to the impotent rage burning through Cass.

Bas stumbled back, nearly dropping the sword, pulling the dagger out of his stomach and tossing it to the ground. His smile was dark as he gripped the sword pommel with both hands and lunged forward. Cass had no practical weapon, the only thing he had left were his powers. He opened himself to the infernal fury, his body shuddering with the influx… and every iota of power flowed to Mara, abandoning him to follow his heart. *Protect her.*

Just a little more strength, that's all he asked… enough to protect her.

The sword plunged into his chest; he felt it slice all the way through his rib cage and sink into his shoulder blade, missing his heart by a thread.

* * *

JEZ JUMPED IN, pulling Mara close, shielding her neck and pressing a dagger into her hands. She couldn't look up to thank him, so she showed him, swinging out with a vicious arc, the blade arching down the Erinyes body. Leira jumped back with a screech, stumbling back and away.

She didn't have the strength in her body to chase down the Erinyes, she held the dagger close to her chest, prepared for another attack as Jez covered her back. She tried turning her head to see where Leira had run to, but the twinge of pain and ensuing dizziness brought a wave of nausea. Dying was hell on the constitution.

"Jez. Find her. I want her head," she hissed out on a gasp of pain.

Jez just shook his head, hyper-vigilant to the surrounding skirmishes. "If I abandon you Amara, it would only be to go to Cass." He propped her against him and turned them as one to follow Cass fighting off Basileus.

Aza and Levistus were circling close, every forward movement was thwarted by her own Dominae. If she could yell...

Cass grunted with pain, reclaiming both Mara and Jez's attention. The sword was buried in his chest, Bas's eyes bulging as he tried to work it free with both hands. Cass brought up his leg, planted his boot in Bas's chest and kicked. Sweat was visibly running down Cass's pale face, she could hear his sharp hisses as he wiggled the sword free of the bone it was buried in.

Bas lunged for him once more, a squeak of dismay escaped her lips before Aza tackled him to the ground. A short-lived reprieve before Aza was pulled back into the fray with her own people.

Bas continued to barrel for Cass, but her clever, strong *husband* — dark gods but that word did funny things to her insides — freed the sword.

Both hands gripped the pommel, the blade itself shimmering with an eerie incandescence.

Cass looked more like the young god as was his birthright than he did demon at that moment. The light of the divine shone favorably on him, granting him justice. Strength.

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THE FINAL ACT

THE SWORD HUMMED IN HIS GRIP, CHANNELING POWER HE NEVER KNEW HE had, lighting up Bas's angelic features with its unnatural glow. Bas crashed into him, knocking one of his hands off the pommel, freeing it to grip Bas's shirtfront and pull him up to his face. The anger wasn't there. Instead, it was the feel of his mouth, his hands… the pleasure he was capable of…

"No," Mara shrieked, breaking the trance. "Cass, focus. He's using his power."

Prince of Pleasures. He was an idiot for not sensing it.

"*Come now, young prince, I'll teach you everything you need to know. You can start by thanking me on your knees," pale golden hands worked free the closure of his pants.*

He closed his eyes, trying to focus. He released the tight hold he had on his own power and Bas groaned low, hooking his hand around the back of Cass's neck. Lust and pleasure combined, the air in the room thick with it, Cass couldn't take his eyes off Bas's to check on Mara.

Bas's fingers trailed down his neck and up to cradle his jaw, his eyes never leaving Cass's as he leaned in. He licked his lips just before he pressed them to Cass's, his mouth was soft, hot… familiar. With a groan, he pulled Bas in closer and ran his hand into his hair, grasping it tightly, deepening the kiss.

"I've missed this," Bas whispered, his hand running down the front of Cass's shirt, pressing soft kisses in between words. "So beautiful Cassius.

The way it feels together."

"You want it to be you?" Strong fingers held his face towards the absolute depravity that was occurring. "Be still and watch him helping himself to what's yours. I have orders to start breaking bones if you flinch, and I won't hesitate."

Their powers mingled, perfectly enriching the other. It was a beautiful creation, but the emotion it invoked was false. He could see that now that he knew how it was supposed to feel. An inferno of rage churned in his gut, dulled by the sheen of pleasure and lust, but that was the true emotion. That's what he needed to focus on.

Bas was just as guilty as his father for what happened to his wife.

His hand hesitated, but only for a breath.

He brought up the sword and pressed it into Bas's belly, feeding it up through his abdominal cavity, tearing through organs.

Slowly Bas withdrew, breaking off their kiss to blink in confusion, then looking down to Cass's trembling hand. When their gazes met, there was a question in his eyes, but when he opened his mouth to speak, blood bubbled from his lips.

"Just a kiss," Cass whispered, his mouth meeting Bas's once more.

Bas grunted, his body falling into Cass's, his lips going cold but still moving against his. His body began to glow with the same eerie light as the sword, his skin cracking to allow the light out, shrinking and shriveling around the cracks. Bas's mouth opened in silent agony, his hands clawing at Cass as his body broke apart.

"Cassius! No!" Azadiel shouted, running for Cass. "If you kill Asmodeus's Herald, you'll be openly declaring war."

He heard Leira's indistinct scream, echoing off all the surrounding walls, yet somehow far away, all he could see were Bas's clear blue eyes clouding over, closing slowly, his breaths shortening as he pulled the sword back. Az was right to be concerned. They were nowhere near ready to incite war, today proved that.

Instinct was screaming inside his skull to end this, to remove Basileus as a threat, to ensure the Prince of Pleasures could never again play him, or harm his Mara.

That thought tipped the scale, Bas would die. One swift jab with his sword through the base of his neck would ensure he never again

regenerated. As he made to strike, his long spent strength gave out, the blade of his sword failing to reach its target.

"He's about to collapse," Jez murmured. "Mara, he's going down—"

"Help me to him, angel. *Please*." She loathed being weak, having no other choice but to ask for his help. But he did.

Jez sat her down as gently as he could and caught Cass under his arms, lowering him beside her. Azadiel ran up, dragging Bas's body out of their line of sight, the bastard still breathing. She couldn't cross him off her list today.

"Mara, my Mara," he whispered, laying his head on her chest, his eyes drifting shut. "I got your sword back." He smiled up at her, dragging the sword up over his body.

"Our sword." She smiled back, her hand resting on his cheek.

"We're taking our Priestess, family rights or no!" Berith's angry roars floated above the din. "She doesn't belong here."

She met Cass's resigned expression. "They're afraid. As long as the prophecy exists they'll never allow us to remain together."

His thumb brushed along her bottom lip, quieting her words. "We simply don't give them the choice, let's end this Mara."

Dark tendrils of magick began to rise, swirling and weaving together, cocooning both Cassius and Mara, he shone brightly against the backdrop of her darkness. Her darkness to his fire, circling them, surrounding them, protecting them as the vortex expanded and grew in its intensity, wreaking destruction in its path.

"CASS, MARA, STOP!" Aza stopped what he was doing and shouted, his voice filled with celestial command, but it couldn't reach them from within the safety of their own dark world.

Her gaze was glued to the darkness surrounding them, it was breathtakingly beautiful and terrifying, not because of the death and destruction it would cause, but for what it meant. She'd doubted the truth until this moment; the prophecy was true… they were the harbingers of the Apocalypse, the fire and darkness destined to cleanse the Realms.

A soft gasp of wonderment escaped her when his power sank into hers, pulling at her power, siphoning the frenetic energies from her, feeding on it. And with the sensation came a rush of euphoria, something deep inside of her clicking in place, as if her power had always been lying in wait… for him.

“You and me, Mara?”

His lips found hers as he lowered all his inner defenses, and drew from her, his essence fusing with her own. Together they transformed into a maelstrom of darkness and fire, a collision of power collapsing the known worlds in its wake. Already she could hear the approaching gallops of the four horsemen, for they were the apocalypse.

“And let the rest burn.”

AFTERWORD

This is not a story about heroes. This is a story about salvation. A story that started off as a cute romance and took us on a voyage through the realms in unexpected ways.

You didn’t think we’d end their tale with the destruction of all creation did you? (Cough) okay. We might have. (But didn’t.)

There is much more of their story to be told, Cassius and Amara don’t end here.

BONUS CONTENT

Includes:

- Prequel scene: Ava
- Prequel scene: Searching for The Sword
- Deleted scene: Birthdays and Beaches
- Deleted scene: Council Warnings

1

Before he was the Demon King, Cassius was the sin-eater, one of the few demons that can feed directly off sins.
This story was written when Cass was still a concept of a character, but it was the one that opened up his depths. More than a sin-eater, more than a demon – a being with a heart that longed for his lost soul.

Ava

He came to awareness slowly, his massive bed full to capacity, wondering what had woken him out of his lust gorged stupor. The bulky arm of an incubus weighed down his chest, as prince of Lust he was one of the few beings who could feed them and their succubi sisters to satiation. Normally, he didn't fall asleep afterwards, he'd run himself to exhaustion evading his father's dictates while plotting behind his back. He ran his fingertips over the crowning horn that curved along the incubus' head, pondering briefly how much simpler his life would be if he were a mere incubus and not the son of the King of the Hells. He wasn't that far removed from them, both needed sex to survive…

There. That was what woke him. A whisper of a summons, barely strong enough for him to hear, beckoning him instead of forcing. He

couldn’t afford the distraction, yet… he was intrigued. For someone to call him so… nicely – it just never happened.

As it was, he was rarely summoned, and then only by the most powerful of magic users. It took a massive ego and balls of steel to call upon the Crown Prince of the Nine Hells. As sin-eater his hunger was both legendary, and feared.

He took a long look at his bedroom door. Beyond its barriers he knew the archdemons’ ambassadors could be found circling the halls like buzzards–each one eager to gain his favor, and ready to report any gossip back to their keepers.

Without much care or consideration he pushed away the snoozing demoness currently sprawled over his lap, the woman giving a small plaintive groan before being pulled into the arms of an equally naked incubus. He’d fucked and fed like an animal, yet as always – none of them sated his appetite for long. Again he craved... something.

A new taste, a new pleasure.

Perhaps he could run away long enough to appease his curiosity about the nature of this summons. The thought held more appeal than having to deal with the Demonarchy, or the creatures currently occupying the bulk of his bed. He felt the tug again, more insistent. Maybe, he wouldn’t get a choice after all? Rather than resist as was instinct, he welcomed the darkness that followed the summons, and allowed himself to fall through the portal as it opened beneath his feet.

The first thing he noticed was the lingering scent of decay clinging to the air, telling him even before his stark surroundings were revealed that he’d been called to the side of a sickbed. Bloody hells. Rather than finding entertainment he’d hoped for, he’d instead be stuck dealing with yet another mortal searching for an escape from death’s embrace. Soul collecting was the Archduke Mephistopheles’s kink –not his.

“Oh...” she stammered, “I didn’t think it would work.”

Outside the golden circle he was currently trapped within stood a human girl, her large eyes round with shock. Yet even that couldn’t erase the poignant sadness enveloping her, and the evident frailty of her failing body, but her soul–he groaned–was purity itself. So good it was nearly blinding.

“Why have you summoned me?” He let some power leak into his voice, the boom of it making her flinch back and cower into herself.

The girl took a breath, her entire body trembling. Then she surprised him when rather than run, the frail chit straightened her back, threw her shoulders back and notched her chin up in challenge. A tug of recognition pulled in his chest, so sudden and unexpected it recaptured his curiosity and multiplied it.

“I would like to bargain.” Her voice barely shook.

He studied her more carefully. Fine blonde hair hung limp around the pale oval of her face, behind glasses her eyes sparkled an icy blue. Within her chest, her heart beat a weak rhythm, one that would soon fall silent. She was pretty, would likely have been beautiful were it not for the sickness that had ravaged her body. She was painfully thin, her eyes sunken, yet still bright with life even as it continued to fade.

He let the shroud of darkness that surrounded him dissipate, banked down the fire in his eyes and tilted his head, waiting to hear what she wanted.

“If you know enough to summon me, then you must also know that I am not a demon to bargain with, love. So why would you call for me?”

Her thin brows furrowed, her eyes filling with sorrow. “You’re the demon of lust, aren’t you?”

Irritation prickled. “Prince of Lust.”

With a nonchalant shrug of a shoulder, she replied, “It was one of those, shoot for the moon and you’ll at least hit the top of the tree kind of things. Figured if I started at the top…”

His lips quirked up into a grin, the amusement startling him. “Are you spouting inspirational quotes to me?” He moved to the very edge of the circle, waiting to see if she’d free him.

She scoffed. “It’s either that, or scriptures, both have been driven into my head for most of my life. As if faith and positive thinking will magically cure me.”

“You speak of magic so callously, yet here I am. Surely you must be of witch blood?” She had to possess some claim on power to have summoned him from the Nessus. Not many could boast such a feat.

“I guess. I mean, my grandma was a practicing witch, my mom thought it was a farce. She was proven right when I grew sick, and no amount of hocus-pocus could stop the spread of disease. I stopped believing after they took my breasts.”

“And yet, here I am. So I ask you again, little witch, what is it you wish from me?” he purred, wanting her off-balance. He didn’t want to hear her truths, and certainly did not care for her plight. Mortals died, it was the one thing their kind excelled at.

She clasped her hands together, knotting them up as she hung her head.

“I’ve never had sex.” She mumbled, therefore he wasn’t quite sure if he’d heard her correctly. She lifted her chin once more. “I’m twenty three years old, I’m not sure how much time I have left…and I just wanted to have sex before I died.”

His body simultaneously stiffened and stilled.

“You’d bargain your immortal soul for the pleasures of the flesh?”

He’d not surrender her to the Hells, instead he’d consume her soul himself. Maybe her purity would ease some of the insatiable hunger that tormented his endless existence.

“I just…” her voice cracked, her posture faltering, “I just wanted to know what it is to be loved. Just once. I never had the opportunity to find out for myself.”

He said nothing. There was nothing to say. He routinely gorged himself on sex and lust, it meant nothing to him anymore. Wasn’t sure that it ever did. But love was a foreign concept, one to which he claimed neither access to or knowledge of.

“I was going to ask you to send me a man that could, I don’t know… show me what all the fuss is about, I guess.” Her head tilted as she assessed him, “I didn’t expect demons to look quite so… appealing.”

He smiled again, slightly less surprised than the last time. She was sweet, and entirely too amusing. And he was irresistible.

“Not too bad for a demon?” He gestured down his body, her bright eyes trailing every movement.

She nodded, mouth agape. “You’re actually kind of… stunning. You have this whole aura of sensual allure–like Dracula.”

Sure enough, at the bedside table lay a printed copy of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, a romanticized retelling of the life of Vlad Tepes that had caused a stir noticed even in the Hells.

“I’m no vampire, love.” His voice roughened, the scent of her desire having hit him.

“Doesn’t matter, you’ll do.”

“If that’s how you feel, then why do you hesitate to break the circle?”

“Oh. Right..” With a quick sweep of her toe she breached the circle that bound him in place, freeing him without even having reached an agreement. Silly girl. Any other demon worth their weight would tear her apart and call it a day. But somehow that thought just didn’t appeal to him. Where was the fun in destroying something this delicate and unique?

“I’m tired of infirmaries. Of walking the same hallways and garden paths day in and out, watching others live their lives while waiting for my own to end…” Her words were full of conviction yet for each step he took to approach, she stepped back, until her backside hit the vanity and she could move no further. He kept walking.

“I’ll ask for a final time. What…do...you…want?”

“I want an experience of my own, a memory untainted by my illness. I want you to make me forget I am dying, and show me what it is to live.”

His fingers swept her hair back from her neck, trailing up her jaw to lift her mouth to his. “There has to be more to life than what I’ve been allotted.”

The words settled with a jarring sense of familiarity, tugging on an unfamiliar emotion he didn’t care to process. He shoved it down and brought his lips closer to hers.

“Are you going to keep talking through it?” He brushed his lips across hers.

“Uh, no–nope not me,” she kept talking, licking her lips nervously.

“I’ll try to be gentle,” he whispered against her cheek. And he meant it. For whatever reason, he wanted to hold her like she was delicate porcelain, the kind that was worn thin with age, that you cherished because it was irreplaceable.

Her throat crackled as she swallowed, her hands tentatively circling his neck. “Don’t be, I'm tired of being treated as if I were made from glass. I won’t break.”

But she had been broken. As he unbuttoned her shirt it revealed the knitted edges of fading scars. He removed her glasses and set them on the dresser behind her, taking a moment to collect himself. Mortals were so fragile…

His fingertips gently traced the skin where her breasts had once been. He touched her not inquisitively or gently, but full of reverence, feeling nothing but awe for her body. For the scars left by the battles she’d fought, and the war she’d inevitably lose. Her breath caught and she swayed. He

wrapped his arm around her waist to hold her up, not wanting to rush. She was a delicacy, a taste to be savored.

“Open your eyes,” he said, tilting her face back up. “I want you to know who’s kissing you. I want to know you won’t be imagining I’m some sort of fantasy bloodsucker while I kiss you...”

Her eyes blinked open, the gray flecks in the blue bright, her pupils eating up nearly all of the color.

“No vampires,” she said quietly. “I want to kiss a demon instead.” Her hands wove into his hair and pulled his head down, her lips hesitating over his.

He kissed her slow, sucking at her mouth, easing her into what he needed from her. Her tongue sought out his mouth first, and he took the cue to deepen the kiss, twining his tongue with hers, pulling back to nibble at her bottom lip which was plump with desire.

Her hands tightened in his hair, her body depending entirely on his strength to hold her up, so he hefted her up, guiding her legs around his waist, holding her under her ass as he walked them back to her bed. She weighed almost nothing.

He lay her down and tugged up her gown, her innocent white cotton panties bringing another smile to his face. She had placed her arms over her chest, shy and trying to hide from him. She didn’t know that she was more bare to him than anyone who could ever see just her body. And she was a thing of beauty. Selfless, inquisitive, hopeful though she had all the reason in the world to have lost faith.

He lifted her arms over her head, holding down her wrists as his mouth moved down the column of her neck. She was making soft little noises, squirming under him, unaware of what she was seeking, but asking nonetheless.

He kissed every inch of her silky skin and the rough lashes that marred her torso until she squealed, then giggled, trying to free her hands from his grip. He kept her prisoner beneath his lips until her embarrassed giggles turned into whimpers of need.

He moved his leg between her thighs, so her rocking hips had something to relieve the pressure, and released her hands so he could move down her body. He trailed soft kisses and slow licks all the way down, her hands back in his hair, her back arching up to meet his mouth.

His fingers found her damp folds, sliding back and forth until she opened fully. With his thumb circling her clit, he pushed one finger into her sheath, her body instinctively tightening against the invasion.

He moved back up to kiss her again. Slow and deep, her moans getting lost in his mouth. He eased his finger in and out slowly, adding another when he felt her getting more plump, her wetness dripping down his hand. Her felt her stretching, felt her finally accepting, then moved more, his thumb steadily circling.

“Oh god, don’t stop.” She broke off their kiss, just to make demands.

And damn it all, he smiled again.

Then his mouth went back to hers, sucking the plump lips, letting his teeth scrape as he pulled back, and with a soft grunt, her back shot up like a bowstring, her sheath tightening around his fingers in pulses, nails digging into his scalp, she came.

He pulled out his fingers and replaced them with his tongue, lapping up her orgasm, letting her ride it out as he readied her for another. This time, he’d be buried deep in that tight, hot sheath–she was ready for him.

“Holy fuck.” She said, breathless and panting. “Don’t… no more… oh god…” and she was there again already, her body on the edge.

“you’re certain about this?” He stopped licking to ask. For whatever reason, he needed her to be sure. “I don’t even know your name?” and he needed to. He wasn’t going to let her fade from his memory as life faded from her.

“Ava. It’s Ava.” She pulled at his shoulders, trying to pull him up her body. “Please. I want to know…”

Such sweet pleading. With a final lick, and a sharp suck of her hardened little bud, he eased up onto his elbows, pulling her legs around his waist.

“Ava.” Her name sounded like a benediction rolling off his tongue. “I’m going to be inside you now.” He kissed her when he saw her eyes sharpening. Needed her to stay in her haze, primed and on the verge… “Your innocence belongs to me.”

She nodded, gasping for breath as he prodded at her entrance.

One hard thrust and he was in. Her nails gouged his back, the sharp pain sending a flash of pleasure through him, so intense that he pulled back and thrust again, harder.

“Ouch,” she yelped, slapping his chest. “I know what I said, but ease up a bit will you?”

He laughed. Buried in her tight sheath, his cock aching with the need for release and he laughed.

“Sorry, love.” He brushed her hair from her face gently, with tenderness. “Ava.” He amended. She deserved her name, not the meaningless endearment he bestowed on all who entered his bed.

He leaned over her and took her mouth again, deep, devouring, his tongue exploring and encouraging. Her legs relaxed, one heel running up the back of his leg, hooking her leg around his waist. His tongue and lips pulled at her mouth, teeth bumping against hers as her hunger increased.

He felt her pulsing around him, that tight clutch of hers sucking him deeper- he needed to move. He rocked his hips slowly, watching her face. Her husky moans spurred him on.

He got up onto his knees, holding her legs up around his waist and pumped in and out, grinding their hips together as she twisted her hands into the bedsheets. But damn he wanted those nails dug in–she didn’t, however.

Instead she moaned when he nipped at her earlobe, and shivered when he grazed his teeth down her neck, his fingers searching out her throbbing clit. He rubbed it, pressure firm as he fucked her harder, her panting moans and rocking hips had him so fucking close…

“Oh yes, right...there.”

The next instant her back arched, her legs tightened around his waist, and she let out a most wonderful cry while holding him deep inside. And upon hearing that glorious sound, he let his own climax wash through him, giving into a blinding release.

He collapsed over her, ear against her chest, listening to the irregular rhythm of her heart. Her fingers ran through his hair, twisting up then neatening it, mindlessly, the same way his thumb dragged back and forth across her side. He was at peace. For the moment. For once.

“your heart?” It had faltered, her breathing slowing.

“I told you. I’m dying.” She took in a deep breath, and he lifted his head off her so she could breathe easier. “They’ve been removing pieces of me for years hoping to stop the spread, eventually I just ran out of spare parts.” She laughed lightly, but he felt her sadness. Along with an

answering pang in his own chest. Again that strange familiarity, lingering like a ghost in the recesses of his mind.

He eased off her, lifting her easily, and carried her into her bathing room where he washed her carefully while she looked up at him with stars in her eyes. Normally, he'd run as soon as he'd had his fill, but not this time. Because for some idiotic reason, he actually *wanted* her to look at him with her heart bleeding into her eyes. Needed to feel, even for a moment that he himself was in fact…loved.

He wrapped the towel around her then himself and carried her back to her bed, laying her on top of him and holding her close.

"Prince, does this mean there is an afterlife?" her voice was whisper soft, full of hope. "Will I get to be with you?"

The mere thought of it had his insides twisted. She would be now. She had bargained her eternal soul for something he took so for granted…

His thoughts blanked as her hot mouth wrapped around his cock.

"All the hells. Ava!" His hips bucked at the shock of the sensation, his body no longer sated, but ravenous once more.

"I'm only going to have one shot at this, so might as well try it all," she spoke quickly, eager to get back to the task at hand.

She licked, sucked, took him so deep she gagged, tears running down her cheeks, but still she kept at it, eager didn't even begin to describe. He groaned, his hand on the back of her head, guiding her into a steady rhythm… then she stopped, releasing him with a pop and climbing over him. She bit her lip as she tried to guide him inside of her, and he took pity, fisting his own erection, rubbing it against her, spreading the moisture before plunging in deep.

"For a being that's supposed to be horrid, you're actually beautiful," she said, moaning as he stretched her wide. "I'm glad I picked you." Her words were nearly lost, his own growls loud and getting louder.

She rode him hard, taking everything she could.

When they were both once again sated, she cuddled up next to him and he wrapped his arm around her, listening to her heart beat falter.

"Ava?" He jiggled his arm. Not liking the direction this was going.

"It's okay. I'm ready."

He felt the pain radiating from her as her body fought for life.

"Sleep then. Be easy. Just sleep," he whispered against her hair, using his power to relax her body into slumber.

When her heart stopped, he wasn’t prepared. Sadness seeped into his chest, and fuck it, he let it. She deserved that much. She had lightened his heart, even for the moment they’d had, the least he could do was grieve for her. Just a little.

“She was so close to salvation. Couldn’t you have shown her mercy?” A Celestial whose face he recognized but name he’d conveniently forgotten looked down on him with scorn.

“Mercy is your charge, not mine. But you’re in luck today, the girl outwit me. I was so caught up in debauchery I neglected to discuss terms of payment.”

There’d been an understanding between them sure, but technically his terms hadn't been agreed upon. And with their bargain left unsealed, his sin couldn’t taint her soul, leaving her as pure as when he found her.

“Take good care of her in Heaven, she’s earned her place there.”

Without another word he then slipped back through the opening portal, one that would take him back to his own bedroom, and his own living Hell.

“Basileus was looking for you.” Prince Azadiel spoke from a darkened corner, where he sat on a chair, eyes of piercing blue gleaming from inside the shadows.

“Got summoned.” Cass nodded. “Nothing worth mentioning.”

“Before Basileus, I was your teacher Cassius.” So he said, Cass had no memory of this, and tried not to dwell on a past that only brought blinding headaches. “And in all these years not once have you succeeded in lying to me. I know where you were just now, and I know what you did. At long last, I believe the time has come for you to meet a certain girl I've been looking after.”

This was unexpected. “You’ve been hiding a lover from me?”

“Not mine...” For a moment Azadiel looked as if he were about to say more, but quickly changed tactics. “I believe she can help you.”

He’d been meeting with the Prince for one reason–their desire to see his father deposed a mutual goal.

“Who in their right mind would ever support my efforts to overthrow my father?”

Just like that, he was thrown back in Hell, thrust into a life marked by the mad machinations of his father, and the twisted depravities of his court. Yet for a brief moment, he’d come as close today as a demon could to feeling loved.

“Oh, I never claimed she was right of mind.” Azadiel actually smiled when speaking, which was odd, for no matter how many years between them, he could not recall ever seeing his former teacher smile. “She’s been a long time prisoner of your father, and is the High Priestess of the Warlocks.”

2

Amara and Gwynn have a decades long relationship by the time this story starts. Gwynn was many things, mentor, protector, lover–but firstly, her friend whose purpose was to help her stand on her own feet. He unearthed the mythos surrounding the sword, since it wasn't necessary to get into those details for the purpose of Mara and Cass's story, here's a taste of how it went.

Searching for The Sword

Though he wasn't the last person she expected to see standing on the lawn of her humble cottage on Gaia, seeing the Fae King out of his element was always a surprise. Not always a good one, but it never failed to make her insides giddy, as though she were the young girl she'd never had a chance to be.

He was as beautiful and untamed as the lightning storm he stood in, the flashes lighting up his pale face, the rain plastering his black hair to his forehead. His head was tilted back, eyes closed, as though he were in ecstasy–something she'd witnessed more times now than she could count–rather than standing alone in a storm.

She knew him to be a solitary creature, as she was herself, irrevocably maddened with more power than he could handle, but undeniably

gorgeous. Shallow of her, she supposed, but she allowed herself the indulgence. There was more to him than madness and beauty, she was one of the few close enough to know.

She took a step towards him and he turned, eyes as brightly blue as the traceries surrounding the lightning. A good sign. They turned gold when lost to a vision or the influx of the Wild Magic he precariously controlled.

Sane Gwynn promised good things.

He walked up the steps leading up to the door in all his handsome glory, turning to watch her approach with a keen shine of interest in his startlingly blue eyes.

"Gwynn." She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, taking him all in.

His black hair had been cropped shorter since she'd last seen him, his clothes actually matching and properly neat, though soaked through from the rain. Whatever his purpose was, he'd put effort into showing his best. Since she'd seen him naked, unravelled and completely mussed, this was probably some sort of official business.

"I wasn't expecting you. How long have you been waiting?"

"Amara." He reached out his hand for hers, holding it in the guise of helping her up the three wide stairs. "I did send a message to Asurim, it must've missed you."

"You've been too busy to visit?" She hadn't seen him in months, loathe as she was to admit it, she'd been missing his company.

"I've been following a lead. Tracing out patterns to their source, weeding fact from gossip…" He swiped a hand through his hair, shaking the droplets to the wood of her porch as she unlocked the wards from the door. "And you've been busy with your queenly duties."

"Yes well. Thought I was due a little holiday." She stepped around him, entering her stuffy house and immediately wandering off to crack open some windows.

"I heard." Gwynn was right behind her, hands grazing her hips before settling more surely when she didn't flinch from his touch. *She was getting better with that.* "About Asmodeus. Lost his crown, but now he's out of your reach."

He was her friend, confidante—the only other person still alive who knew of her list of enemies and the reasons for each. She leaned back into his chest, not ready to speak her feelings with him watching her with his too-clever gaze.

“Temporarily removed. I’m not ready to face him. I… he’s too powerful yet.” She turned, burying her face in his firm chest. “His influence will be lessened this way at least.”

Gwynn hummed a noncommittal noise and brushed his hand down her hair.

“I think I’ve found the solution to your Namtar problem.”

She admired the nonchalance of his one-eighty subject change, knowing he was dropping a bomb of relief even as he failed to address the other issue he’d brought up in the first place. Vexing Fae.

“What solution can you offer? I’ve looked through every loophole and short of killing him—“

He pressed a finger to her lips. “Killing him.” He nodded with assurance and her world dropped out from under her.

Killing… a god. There were very few ways, none that were common knowledge. The old ones kept that knowledge close to the chest, or buried with those who chanced to discover it.

“A weapon that can kill a god? They’re myths.”

“So I thought as well.” He walked to her stove, grabbed her kettle and filled it, turning it on to boil before leaning against the counter to face her. “But if something is mentioned enough times it’s worth sifting through for the grain of truth.”

“And you think you’ve found this grain?” Her brow quirked, lips turning up into a soft smile reserved only for this man, the one who’d been so patient and steadfast for as many years as she’d walked free. “When my own scholars and oracles have turned up nothing of the sort?”

He smiled then, brightening his austere countenance into something more attainable, not remote and removed from the world, but lively and absorbed in it. She turned from the look, the invitation of it, grabbing a couple of mugs as he filled her tea pot from a bag he’d pulled out of his pocket.

“I promise you it’s been worth my time.”

“Is it… how? I don’t want to do anything that’ll only stave him off temporarily, they regenerate, even if it takes centuries and I won’t want to deal with him any more then…” she trailed off when she noticed his indulgent smile, the mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “You better not be teasing me. If you just wanted to see me, you know I enjoy your company —“

“I wouldn’t taunt you about this Mo’ stór. I didn’t want to come until I had something more solid than speculation, but I’ve hit a wall in my research. Conall has been searching his internet and I’ve been poring through my fathers old tomes,” he sighed, tapping her chin up to close her gaping mouth, following it with a brief kiss as though he couldn’t help himself.

He wandered off through her house, leaving her staring absently at the raindrops trailing down her kitchen window, her mind running through years of research and possibilities she may have missed. She’d been thorough, relentless even, in her pursuit to cleave the contract her mother had made with the death god, all to no end. A flicker of hope danced within reach, she didn’t dare grasp for it–even knowing how intelligent and single-minded Gwynn could be, information was fraught with lies and misinterpretations.

He returned scrubbing a towel over his head, shirtless, and she shamelessly ogled his fae-gifted beauty. His wasn’t the sensual appeal of the sin-eater, but that of an ethereal presence, to be appreciated more than absorbed in.

He dropped the towel to his shoulders and filled their mugs, carrying both into her sitting room, expecting she’d follow like a good little curious kitten, and damn her, she did–the bait was too juicy to allow for feminine pique.

“Drink. It's a citrus and vanilla blend with spices.” He placed the mug on the coffee table, grabbed her hand and tugged her to her couch, pulling her down on his lap, taking a small notebook from his pants pocket and pressing it into her hands.

“We need to find my father’s old sword.”

“What does a faery sword have to do with slaying ancient deities?”

“It wasn’t always my father’s sword. The chain of possession is obscured in a few places but I’ve found references leading it back to the Sumerian deities.” He opened the book and passed it back to her, tapping some text. “Claidheamh Soluis. The sword of Light. Given to my father Lugh by the god Nuada Airgetlám.”

She looked up at him, the lines of strain around his eyes and lips. Gwynn never spoke of his past, his parentage—his family. Though she’d met his sister under some less than fortunate circumstances regarding her vampire husband and his unceasing blood lust.

“Your father was Lugh? As in the Celtic god?”

Gwynn smiled wryly, shaking his head. “He was no more a god than I. But mortals,” he shrugged, “saw too much of what he was and deemed him so.”

“So…” she needed a moment for the information to settle. “You don’t know where this sword is now?”

“My father gave it to a worthy mortal ruler before this common era. Conall and I traced the line of King Solomon to no avail.”

Recognition dawned. Solomon’s sword—used in the holy wars to turn the tide of Judeo-Christian pantheon. Even she’d heard of that holy blade, said to have been divine blessed. Guess that made sense then.

A name jumped out of the passage of text, one very recognizable. “Shamshir-e Zomorrodnegār. This is the same sword?”

He nodded, pulling her closer to his chest and resting his cheek on her head in an uncharacteristic showing of intimacy. “As I’ve said, we traced the lines most thoroughly. It disappeared after the rise of Christianity.”

“We have to find it. I’ll get my best seers scrying—“

He chuckled, kissing her temple. “Ah yes, we should find it, why didn’t I think of that?”

She turned and smacked his chest. “Cheeky Fae. This is the best lead I’ve had in… ever.”

“Enough to earn me a kiss?”

There wasn’t much she could deny him when he was looking all young and mischievous… and fully sane. A rarity she wasn’t about to squander.

“Much more than a kiss, I’d say.” The notebook fell to the floor as she turned in his lap and wrapped her hands around his neck

“It’s okay to admit you missed me, A’stór.” He smiled as he leaned in, tightening his grip on her waist to drag her closer.

She smiled back, not unaffected by his charm. “More than I miss my favorite silks when they’re being laundered, less than I miss my magic on this realm.”

His thumb swiped down her cheek, fingers curling under her jaw. “Next time, I’ll visit you in your chambers. I didn’t want to take the chance of being overheard…”

“Are you going to kiss me or shall we get into a discussion of politics?”

He let out a breathless chuckle as he finally pressed his lips to hers, soft, gentle, waiting for her to set the pace, always considerate. She quickly took control, her body having gone too long without the fulfillment he offered, deepening the kiss, digging her hands into his damp hair, losing herself to sensation.

3

Cass isn't a nice guy, but he has his moments. There is backstory to his and Verity's friendship, none of which fit into the progression of the novels, but perhaps something to revisit someday. His attachment to Verity's children is sweet and sets him apart from the reckless and destructive Demon we all know and love.

Beaches and Birthdays

(*After "and the monsters, they were beautiful', before Cass goes to visit Barbatos*)

He turned over the forged sigil in his palm, ensuring it was perfectly smooth. Wouldn't do to have anything that could snag…

"You can't ignore your deal with Mephistopheles. He laid out the terms." Levistus kept pace with him, even though Cass was eating up ground with his long strides.

"I'm not ignoring it. I didn't give him a timeline." Cass pocketed the amulet, keeping his hand closed around it.

"Think, son. He stated that he would give you his armies in exchange for the meeting." Levistus was getting snarly. "He means exactly as he

says.”

Cass stopped walking. “I said I’ll do it.” He didn’t want to. His guts churned up every time he thought about seeing her.

“What is more important than seeing your main gate guarded?” Levistus dragged his hands through his hair, his face red with the exertion of chasing Cass from one end of the fortress to the other.

Cass had tried his damnedest to lose him.

“I have another promise to keep.” Cass’s hands clenched around the amulet.

Levistus sighed, his head dropping back.

“All the hells, Cassius. You’re like a child at times, you know.”

“It’s Silas’s birthday.” Cass said turning his head. He really didn’t want anyone to know just how attached he was to that little boy. “Verity and I have a standing arrangement. Every year, same beach on the mortal realm.”

Levistus swallowed hard, his eyes taking in every nuance of Cass’s expression.

“I’ll make the arrangements though Dravite, then. But we’ll be bringing Lucifer to meet with Amara, and you need to come to terms with that.” Levistus nodded as he fell back into step with Cass.

“Do you want to come meet him?” Cass glanced over, quickly turning back before the other demon could see how much his answer mattered.

“I don’t know what I’d have to say to a four year old.” Levistus smirked. “No, Cass, you go and enjoy your time with the boy.”

“He's five now.” Cass smiled. It had been too long since he’d seen the little guy.

“I would like to go,” a soft voice intruded on his musings.

Levistus’s hand tightened around his arm.

Leira stood at his door, wringing her hands, looking sweet and contrite. Cass wasn’t sure if he was angry at her, or just disgusted with himself. He kept showing too much of his inner workings to her. He didn’t like appearing weak.

“Please,” her eyes were wide, pleading, “I’ve never been to the mortal realm.”

“Alright.” Cass nodded and walked past her, “I’m leaving now. I’m already running late. Tuck away the wings, love.”

He grabbed his jacket off his bed and walked back through the fortress to the only accessible portal to the mortal realm. He couldn't travel through his hellgates, not without pulling the Hells through with him.

He led Leira through, into the beating sun and briny scent of a South American beach. Close to Verity's portal into this realm, the out of the way beach in Ecuador was unpopulated and rarely visited by mortals. The ley-lines were strong, magic ripe in the air.

"Cassius!" Verity called, "you made it"

He was enfolded in her arms before he could speak, and for a moment he gave into the feeling. Belonging. Nurturing. Love?

"Like I would miss it," he pulled back, smiling, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"Is this your… girlfriend?" she stumbled over the word, as though searching for the right term. Rightly, because Cass had never introduced her to a female before.

"This is Leira," Cass said, pulling the Erinyes forward. He leaned over to whisper in Verity's ear, "concubine."

Verity slapped his shoulder. "Naughty demon."

"I'm going to find Silas. I brought a gift," Cass said, walking off toward the water, Leira's hand in his.

"Is he yours?" Leira asked softly, her eyes glued to the boy.

Cass snorted. "Uh, no. his father is…"

"Cassius." Andrus came out of nowhere. "No more summoning tools for my son."

Cass laughed, and Leira swayed on her feet.

"I've got something better." Cass pulled out the amulet from his pocket. "He can summon me directly with this."

Andrus shook his head. "I have to greet my wife. If you'll keep my son occupied for a while?" The suggestive grin on the god's face spoke volumes. "I can't stay here long unnoticed."

"Go. Silas and I have stuff to do." Cass grinned back.

"Uncle Cass!" Silas squealed and Cass caught him up as the boy lunged for his arms.

"Hey little buddy," Cass hugged him tight. "Been a while."

"I tried calling you like you said and I got in trouble cause it wasn't you that came." Silas was already squirming out of his arms. "Can we build a castle like last time but bigger? And I want a dragon!"

“Course. Look what I brought you for your birthday,” Cass said holding up the amulet before fastening it around the boy’s neck. “Now you can summon just me whenever you need.”

“And you can read me a bedtime story?” Silas held up the sigil, tracing it with his sandy fingers.

“I’d rather you used it for emergencies. But sometimes, I will try.” Cass ruffled his hair and took his hand, letting the boy lead him back to the pile of sand he’d already been digging up.

Leira sat beside them, her hand rubbing across Cass’s back every once in a while as he and the boy shaped the mound of sand into something resembling a castle.

“You’re very good with him,” Leira said, her smile wistful.

A female sort of wistfulness that put him on edge. He should probably put her off any ideas of that sort.

“This dragon isn’t very good.” Silas stood, looking down at his masterpiece. Cass couldn’t hold back the snicker. The ‘dragon’ resembled more a male appendage than fire breathing creature.

“I say it looks rather accurate,” he laughed again and moved closer to help Silas fix it before his mother saw.

“You don’t have any children?” Leira asked, her hand resting on his back again.

Cass’s entire body stiffened. Hells no. He was nipping this in the bud, before she got any more of those thoughts.

“No. Nor will I ever.” He glared at her in warning. Yeah, wouldn’t do for her to get any hopes up.

She flinched back from whatever she saw in his eyes and looked back to the water.

“You can go in it, if you’d like.” He said, trying to put her back at ease.

She smiled, her eyes lighting up. “I can?”

“Go ahead. I’ll keep an eye out. Just stay close to shore, the undertow is strong.” Cass nodded toward the crystal blue cove and went back to sculpting Silas’s dragon.

He eventually gave in and brought Silas into the water, stripping down to his boxers, and holding the boy’s hand tightly. He hadn’t planned on swimming, but the sun was hot, the water inviting, the Erinyes a playful siren as she laughed and splashed water all around.

They jumped over waves until Silas's energy finally waned. Leira lifted him into her arms, smiling beatifically at the boy. Cass's annoyance with the furie waned completely at the sight of Silas's bony arms clinging to her neck as they walked back to shore.

She was young. He had to keep reminding himself. She didn't know any better. Thought she'd been pleasing him…

"I've had cake made, " Verity said, scooping her son back into her arms.

She didn't need to say that Andrus had already left them, the poignant sadness in her eyes mirroring something inside of Cass. He didn't need to know the emotion to recognise it.

Leira tucked her hand into his, startling him for a moment, and as he looked down at their joined hands, he felt the yawning void of his memories opening, taunting him with flashes of a picture that his mind couldn't hold on to.

Sand through a sieve.

But the feeling remained. The ache. The sharp sense of loss. The desperate sense of urgency…

Verity sat Silas on Cass's lap once they settled around a table in the screened-in porch of the beach house, and went off to gather his birthday cake.

"Did you have a good birthday, little man?" Cass smiled down at the boy.

Silas nodded, squirming until he could turn around to face Cass. "I'm going to have a big party at the fortress and mama says all the courts will be there, are you going to come too Uncle Cass?"

Cass met Verity's eyes over the elaborate cake she sat down, her head shaking minutely.

"Sorry, little buddy. It's not a very good idea for me to go to your realm." He rested his hand on the back of the boy's head, grabbing a plate of cake from Verity to set down in front of him. "Eat your cake. We got to have a nice visit today, yes?"

Silas looked up at him, a scowl on his face. "But you brought her and it was just supposed to be our day."

Cass leaned closer, speaking just to Silas, grinning at Leira, "I think she's rather pretty."

Silas's eyes slid to her, then back to Cass. "She is pretty and dark." He said with a nod.

Cass said nothing. There was no way to respond. He accepted his piece of cake and took a bite, and laughed when he saw Leira licking off her spoon and nodding when Verity asked if she wanted more.

Leira seemed different here. Lighter, smiling. At ease. She kept touching him though. His arm, his shoulder–and his head kept insisting it was wrong.

Something inside of him had decided what it wanted, and whether he consciously remembered, every part of him sung with the urgency of attaining it.

By the time he hugged Silas goodbye the boy was nearly asleep in his arms. Verity gave Cass a kiss on the cheek, smiling sadly at him.

"You look more of a wreck than usual Cass." She stepped back holding his hands. "get some sleep would you."

He smiled, giving a half-hearted sniff. "You seem just as tense." He ran his thumb across her cheek. "Go spend some time with your husband and children."

She smiled brightly. "You go spend some time… torturing damned souls or whatever you do." She hefted Silas up onto her shoulder and waved them off.

He shook off Leira's hand when they got back through the portal, her insistence on holding it setting his teeth on edge. She was seeing far too much into what they had.

He backed up a step. "We're done here. I have stuff to do." She was wringing her hands, looking nervous and skittish, but her eyes, when they met his were cold. Shrewd.

"you're going to run off and go moon over the Fae queen?" She sneered, "you're forever chasing the unattainable, not seeing what's right in front of you!"

He lunged forward, grasping her face gently, turning it up to his. "Little girl, you need to remember your place." He growled and dropped his hand.

"As your whore?" she yelled leaning forward, hands balled at her sides.

He nodded. "Exactly."

He spun and walked away without looking back.

4

The introduction to the Gods Council would have been too much clutter in an already full storyline, but they are the governing body that keeps all the overpowered gods in line, the council of their peers. Originally there was one Mortal moderator to be the balance fulcrum of light and dark, this is a brief mention of him dealing with the fallout of Cass and Jareth's irritation with one another.

RESOLUTION WITH THE VAMPIRE

(*BEFORE 'ENTANGLED AND DROWNING'*)

AZ CLEARED his throat and turned back to Cass. "You ready then?"

It was the first time Az had left Levistus's side since he'd been recovered, today Cass needed him more. There was safety in numbers, and if he were to be imprisoned today–or threatened with it, he trusted Az at his side to see him cleared.

He nodded, patted Jez on the shoulder and strolled down to the portal to the mortal plane. They came through at the arched doorway of the main Council building, knocking to be polite.

The old man opened the door, looking far more aged than Cass last remembered, and he felt a pang at seeing the old man looking so fragile. He'd been a routine fixture in Cass's life–for as long as he could remember. His father had been overly fond of calling council meetings.

"Amon, how are you faring?" Cass said with a smile, patting the old man on his bony shoulder.

"Very well, Cassius." He wiggled his brows, "I suppose it's 'your highness' now, eh?"

"No need, we've known each other too long now." Cass stepped back to Az's side, waiting for Amon to move out of the way so he could enter.

"There'll be no trouble here today, young king." Amon said, his stern tone telling how little Cass intimidated him. "Bad blood or no, yourself and the Blood Lord are to mind yourselves in my halls."

Shame fueled his anger. Hells only knew what Jareth had uncovered in his memories, every single one was degrading to some extent. The memory of the Blood lord slamming his fist into Amara's face stoking the simmering rage. He never wanted to experience that form of impotent fury ever again.

After some internal deliberation, Cass offered a solemn nod, and Amon finally stepped out of the way, allowing Cass and Az to sweep past him. He took in a deep breath, the smell of the old leather-bound books comforting, the underlying scent of wood polish bringing back a flood of memories.

His father had kept them all in line, and now there was no one filling that void. He would always be merely the son of Asmodeus. Never near as frightening or as cold as his sire, no matter the damage he'd wrought when he had helped Mara claim her throne, or the inroads he'd been making with his own.

"And there he is. Young Cassius," Jareth wandered into the room with a young acolyte in tow. One Cass recognized well. "You remember David?"

Of course he did. Mara had removed his eye… he wore an eye patch still, growing back the organ must be slow-going.

"yep. 'I'," Cass said, tapping the side of his eye, earning a death glare from the young vamp, "remember."

David moved forward, stopped only by Jareth's arm barring his chest.

"Azadiel." Jareth nodded to Az, "odd place to run into you. I thought you bound to the hells."

“Mind yourself.” Az growled, and Cass shot him a look. Bound?

“You know what this celebration needs?” Cass said, his voice louder than the snarling going on. “Drinks! Amon, your finest, if you please.” He called out.

Yeah, he was fucking annoyed. Irritated he was going to have to sit through a meeting full of snide undertones and back and forth digs, on top of the chaos and turmoil of his current state of mind.

A younger man came out wheeling a tray as they all took their seats, setting up glasses for the four of them and placing an unmarked bottle in the center.

“My thanks, Eli.” Jareth gave the young man a gracious incline of his head.

So he was on a first name basis with the heir to the human council seat? Cass was so far out of touch with these politics it was laughable. If his father had been in a grave, he’d be turning in it.

“Care to join us for a drink?” Cass asked. “I know how my tolerance is for poison, but I can’t speak for the rest of us here.”

“Ah,” the young man stammered. “It’s blood wine, highness.”

Cass gave him a wicked grin. “Might want to pour us a round then, if you leave it to David there, he’ll have it in our laps. How is that depth perception coming along?” Cass shot a smirk over to the vamp in question and was met with another death glare.

“Did you… are you winking at me?” Cass said, his tone brash as he feigned offense and turned to Az. “Did you see that Az, he’s flirting with me. Sorry my taste doesn’t run to young and blood sucking.”

“Enough.” Jareth snapped. “Azadiel keep your protégé in line before I see to it myself.”

The air in the room shifted as Cass went deadly still. Of course Jareth knew what Az was to him, he’d stolen those memories.

“Word is your taste runs to whatever is available.” David finally spoke. “Whomever cares for a taste.”

With a snarl Cass jumped to his feet, his momentum slowed only by Az’s hand coming to grab his arm.

“Mind your own pet Jareth, or we walk.” Az’s tone was laced with menace.

Cass slumped in his seat, accepting the glass of wine Az shoved into his hand and took a large swallow, the blood tingling on his tongue.

“After you and the Warlock busted into my house…” Jareth started and Cass pulled the glass from his mouth.

“Joined your party,” he nodded and Jareth narrowed his eyes.

“The pair of you. A couple of drunk, bisexual, kleptomaniac disaster clowns with crowns, breaking into my vaults,” his voice was raising, “stealing my personal belongings…”

“Not normally a drinker,” Cass said with a shrug, and every person at the table looked from the bottle in his left hand to the glass in his right.

Az cleared his throat and Cass looked away from the vampire, seething.

“After much sifting through the mush of your memories, I’ve finally seen the pattern.” Jareth spoke between sips of his own. “Your father is not entirely sane, it seems.”

Cass snorted, “could have told you that years ago.”

“Ah yes but you didn’t,” Jareth said coldly. “You didn’t tell a soul what went on did you? No one would know how much Asmodeus’s power had corrupted him.”

“It was no one’s business what went on,” Cass spoke low, trying to keep the shame from being heard in his voice, “my father is what he has always been. I would not have known to look for something that seemed normal to me.” He drank down the rest of his wine and reached for the bottle to refill his glass.

“He was slipping into madness for centuries, since Benzosia. Why is it important now?” Az spoke, the only calm voice in the room.

“Cassius needs to stay away from the Warlock Queen.” Jareth stated, blunt and cold. “I have seen–”

“You’ve seen nothing,” Cass shouted, slamming his glass to the table. “You have no right to discuss my memories as though they are yours. No right to discuss how things were with my father and sure as fuck have no right to tell me who is allowed to be a part of my life.”

He picked up the glass and drained it again, Az sliding the bottle away when he reached for it again.

“Are we calm again?” Jareth chided. “This is my people we are discussing. My realm that is at risk and so help me, you’ll listen to what I have to say.”

“Explain instead of dictating Jareth,” Az said, again the voice of reason. “He doesn’t remember… beyond that night.”

Cass growled out, finally managing to secure the bottle of wine. “All my memories come to an abrupt halt up to my father telling me he was going to kill her.”

Jareth flinched at that. He must have got the full impact of that one, then.

“Your father designed a weapon according to a prophecy that was written eons ago. He’d thought he’d ended it with the demise of his consort, the prophecy, that is.” Jareth nodded and refilled his own glass, waving Callum over with another bottle. “Instead he saw the opportunity to wield the prophecy and mold it to his own ends. He saw that in you and the Priestess.”

Az had gone white as a sheet. Obviously, he’d had no idea.

“So we just don’t trigger whatever it is,” Cass said with a shrug.

“The mere joining of the two of you could be all that it takes.” Jareth met his eyes again, his calm and dark. Cass was sure his were shining with barely subdued flames. “And now whispers of the Sword of Justice being in play…”

“Are you trying to tell me not to have sex with her? Cause that horse has already flown the coop.”

Az snickered. “Lay off the wine Cass. Mixing metaphors?”

“Chickens and stables then.” Cass muttered.

Cass looked down at the thick liquid in his glass, his mind going back to his cock sliding through her slick heat, so fucking close…

“I didn’t ask you here to discuss your sex life.” Jareth barked out. “The shift has already begun. Possibly when the Sword came back into play.”

Cass nodded, “Andrus said something to the effect of it being a harbinger.” His heart pounded. This had nothing to do with he and Amara.

“It’s already begun,” Jareth raised his voice, continuing as though Cass hadn’t interrupted, “and you two are possibly the only beings who can stop it from unraveling completely.”

Cass swirled the wine around in his glass, emptying it once more before looking back to Jareth. “Since you stole all my memories and rifled through them like a pillaging fucking barbarian, tell me,” he kept his eyes locked to the vampire’s, “tell me what she was to me. Explain why, if we were fashioned by my father to be his weapons, why would he actively keep us apart?” He was feeling more melancholic than angry at this point.

“Tell me,” he clenched his jaw, his voice lowering to a snarl, “why I can’t remember my own fucking past?”

“Because, you stubborn little shit, you ruined his plans! He wanted you to use at a time of his own choosing.” Jareth said, carefully averting his eyes, exasperation strong in every word.

He missed her. He needed her. He could freely admit that to himself now. Hard to breathe without her. Assat-shi. His wife. Mara. Were they one and the same? The Blood lord knew—they all knew. They were all keeping it from him.

His power pulled tight to his center. He could feel it wrapping around his lungs, suffocating him. Needed her.

He needed to fucking *know*.

“Do you really think that Asmodeus would want the realms to fold?” Az said, leaning forward in his seat, once again sliding the bottle away from Cass. Little did he know, the new one was directly in reach.

“I am saying that he must have. At some point, he was planning to unleash this upon us.” Jareth leaned forward too, he and Az effectively cutting Cass and David out of the conversation.

He wanted to get up and pace. To bellow out his frustration. His teeth ground as his jaw clenched harder, his mood plummeting to dangerous.

“Here, let me fill that for you, so you don’t get it all over the table.” Cass said to David, ignoring the two of them as he filled the vampire’s glass to the rim.

“Even me,” Jareth was saying, “his oldest companion. He would have seen my own people undone. I am responsible for their safety, Aza. I won’t have my people suffer again, we’ve finally found peace in a realm of our own.”

“Hells, no one wants to see the end of times.” Az spoke with as much familiarity to the Blood Lord as Jareth did with him. “But if it were that dire, I’m certain there would have been celestial interference.”

Cass cleared his throat, drawing their attention. “There might have been.” He said with a shrug and Azadiel’s jaw dropped. “Not saying for sure, Jez’s sister mentioned something to him.”

“Cass, you know I’ve always fought for the two of you, but even I can’t ignore blatant warning signs,” Azadiel said, turning to fully face Cass.

Sweat beaded on his brow, he felt it trickling down the back of his neck, his stomach flipped. The hand holding his glass started trembling, he

set the glass on the table, so no one would notice.

“The Dark King has felt the shift in the wild magic as well.” Jareth said, adding another nail to Cass’s coffin.

Damn the room was getting hot. He drank down more cool liquid, fighting to find enough air to breathe.

“Perhaps staying away from her for the time being would be a wise idea,” Az said. Had he moved closer? “Until we figure out how to prevent whatever is happening, or at least know what will trigger it so as to avoid it.”

That was it, the air was gone entirely. The room was full of thick sludge that he couldn’t drag into his lungs. His ears rang, his heart thudding painfully as it tried to find enough oxygen to pump through his arteries. His vision dimmed, and his head went silent.

“Here now.” The young man, Eli, was leaning over him, pressing a cool cloth to his forehead. “Didn’t know demons could have panic attacks.”

Cass sucked in a sharp breath, looking around the room. they were in one of the archive rooms, it was dark, the smell of leather-bound books soothingly familiar.

“What now?” Cass said, his voice hoarse.

“Yeah my sister has them bad. Luckily I knew just what to do.” His accent was smooth and pleasant. Eastern American, if Cass called it right.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Cass said, sitting up and grabbing the cloth from the boy and holding it over his face.

Eli just nodded. “They’re still drinking in there. Another three bottles down.”

“I was asleep?” Cass looked around, confused, noting the moon shining bright through the windows. It was well after midnight then, they’d been here for hours.

“You passed right out. The one you came with, I got him to carry you in here, so you weren’t overstimulated when you came to,” he said nodding as though Cass knew what he was talking about.

“I have to go. Get home and stuff.” He got to his feet, a little unsteady, took a deep breath, then another and walked back out into the main room.

Az and Jareth sat in front of the fire, both with their feet kicked up and a glass in hand, the somber David sitting in an adjacent chair.

“Az,” Cass said as he walked up. “I need to go home.”

Az looked back to him, set his glass down and got to his feet.

“Are we in agreement then, Cassius,” Jareth said, his voice louder than before, his cheeks flushed- an unusual look for a vampire. “You’ll stay away from Amara?”

Cass’s head was still swimmy, but he knew his own mind. And heart.

“I won’t. Not ever.” He bared his teeth, his own pointy canines nothing compared to the vampire’s fangs, but it was the sentiment that counted. “She is *mine*.”

“If anything happens to my people because of the two of you, I won’t hesitate to hunt you both down like animals,” Jareth said with a breezy nod before turning back to the flames